



8.3



8.4



8.5



8.6

8.3–8.6 Differentiating dreams. *Inception*'s first dream level takes place mostly outdoors in a city, with a white, gray, and black color scheme tinged with blue. In this dream, it's raining (8.3). The second dream's action occurs inside a hotel. The characters wear business clothes, and the corridors and bathrooms have warm brown and orange tones (8.4). The next level involves a large gray fortress and white costumes, set against a snowy mountain landscape (8.5). Finally, "Limbo" places the characters in deserted cities and bare seascapes, where high-contrast sunshine creates both glare and deep shadows (8.6).

Watching and Listening: Style and the Viewer

During a film, the filmmakers' stylistic choices register on us at every moment. We don't take them in passively; we're alert to them, even though we may not be aware of how sensitive we are.

For example, we tend to have expectations about style. If we see two characters in a long shot, we expect a cut-in to a closer view. If the actor seems about to leave the frame, we expect the camera to pan or track to keep the person in the shot. If a character speaks, we expect to hear diegetic sound that is faithful to its source. Like other kinds of expectations, stylistic ones derive from both our experience of the world generally (people talk; they don't chirp) and our experience of film and other media. The specific film's style can confirm our expectations, or modify them or challenge them.

The conventions of the classical Hollywood cinema and of specific genres provide a firm basis for reinforcing our prior assumptions. But other films ask us to revise our expectations somewhat. *Our Hospitality* accustoms us to deep-space manipulations of figures and objects, while *Grand Illusion* makes us expect that camera movements will link characters. Still other films make highly unusual technical choices, and to follow them we must construct new stylistic expectations. The editing discontinuities in *October* and the distorted sound track in *The Conversation* in effect teach us how to understand the film's distinctive style.

In other words, a director directs not only the cast and crew. A director also directs us, directs our attention, and thus shapes our reaction. The filmmaker's technical decisions affect what we perceive and how we respond.

Analyzing Style

In watching a narrative film, we usually don't notice style; we're too busy following the story. Suppose, though, we want to notice stylistic patterning—to enhance our appreciation, or to understand how we might also create films. How can we study style?

One suggestion is apparent: *Look and listen carefully.* But what should we watch and listen for? The last four chapters have made plenty of suggestions. We've also urged you: *Think like a filmmaker.* That mindset can coax you into considering the functions of what you're seeing and hearing. In addition, you can try picking a single scene and concentrating on how techniques blend to create particular effects. We'll do that shortly.

First let's consider four general questions we can ask in trying to understand a film's style.

1. What Is the Film's Overall Form?

A good starting point is to think about how the film is put together as a whole. If it's a narrative film, it will draw on all the principles discussed in Chapter 3. (Not all films tell stories. We'll discuss other types of form in Chapter 10.) Typically, we'll confront a plot that cues us to construct a story. The film will manipulate causality, time, and space. It will probably give characters some goals, motives, thoughts, and feelings, all of which need to be conveyed to the viewer through form and style. The film will use its opening (abrupt or gradual) to introduce a situation. It will have a distinct pattern of development—a search, a journey, an escalating conflict. Characters will change, situations will become emotionally weighted, and parallels will emerge. The film's narration will manipulate what we know and how and when we learn of it, to guide us toward specific responses. And it may play games with conventions by rearranging scenes in time, manipulating degrees of subjectivity, or otherwise challenging us to create a story out of the plot's presentation. Whatever the film's overall form, once you have a grasp on it, you'll find it easier to understand how style works, and works on us.

2. What Are the Main Techniques Being Used?

Here your analysis can draw on our survey of technical possibilities in Chapters 4–7. You can look for things like color, lighting, framing, cutting, and sound. Once you notice them, you can identify them as creative options: not just music, but nondiegetic music; not just framing, but low-angle framing.

Noting and naming are only the beginning. You should try to identify *salient* techniques. What techniques does the film most rely on? The jerky forward zoom in *Wavelength* and the rapid, discontinuous editing of *October* stand out because they play a central role in the overall effect of each film.

In addition, what is salient depends partly on your interests. If a film's style strikes you as typical of a broader approach to filmmaking, you may focus on how the technique conforms to stylistic expectations. The 180-degree editing of *The Maltese Falcon* isn't obvious or emphasized, but adherence to rules of classical continuity is one characteristic of the film's style. Our purpose in Chapter 6 was to show that the film is typical in this respect.

If you want to explore more unusual stylistic devices, you can concentrate on more original, even puzzling choices. Eisenstein's editing in *October* is unusual, representing choices that few filmmakers would make. It was the originality of these options that we chose to stress in Chapter 6. From the standpoint of originality, costume in *October* isn't as salient a stylistic feature as editing because it isn't as original. Your decision about what techniques are salient will be influenced partly by what the film emphasizes, and partly by what you're interested in knowing more about.

3. What Patterns Are Formed by the Techniques?

Once you've identified salient techniques, you can notice how they are organized. Techniques will be repeated and varied, developed and paralleled, across the whole film or within a single segment. Chapters 4–7 have shown how this occurs in some films.

You can zero in on stylistic patterns in two ways. One way is to reflect on your responses. If a scene begins with a track-in, do you expect that it will end with



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We discuss *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* and some aspects of Steven Spielberg's editing and use of light in "Reflections in a crystal eye."



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Some unusual examples of sound/image patterning are analyzed in "Play it again, Joan."

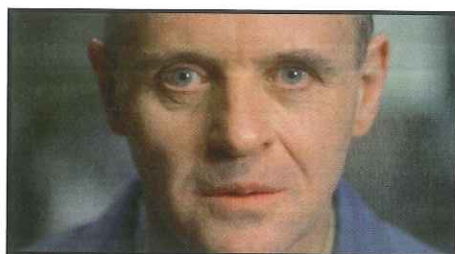
8.7–8.10 Patterns of camera distance and angle. During the initial conversation in *The Silence of the Lambs*, shooting in depth emphasizes the distance between Clarice and Lecter, and each one looks slightly to the right or left (8.7, 8.8). As their conversations become more intense and intimate, the camera positions move closer to each character and shift subtly toward the axis of action until each person is looking directly into the lens (8.9, 8.10).



8.7



8.8



8.9



8.10

a track-out? If you see a character looking left, do you assume that someone or something is offscreen and will be revealed in the next shot? If you feel a mounting excitement in an action scene, is that traceable to a quickening tempo in the music or to accelerating editing?

A second strategy is to look for stylistic patterns that reinforce the unfolding narrative. As we've seen throughout this part of the book, filmmakers often deliberately design the film's style to create parallels or underscore developments in the drama. Shifting color schemes reflect three stages of the plot's development in *Women in Love* (4.42–4.44). A repetition of a key line of dialogue in *The Conversation* creates mystery and leads to conflicting interpretations (p. 301).

Even within a shorter span, style can create a subtle sense of narrative progression. A scene usually has a dramatic pattern of encounter, conflict, and outcome, and the style often reflects this, with the cutting becoming more marked and the shots coming closer to the characters as the scene progresses. We saw this happening in our *Maltese Falcon* scene (6.54–6.74). In *The Silence of the Lambs*, for example, the scenes between Clarice Starling and Hannibal Lecter tend to begin with conventional shot/reverse-shot conversations but become more intimate and psychologically revealing (8.7–8.10). In a later chapter, we'll see how style can also reinforce the organization of nonnarrative films.

Occasionally, stylistic patterning doesn't accord neatly with the overall structure of the film. Style can claim our attention in its own right. We saw this happen in such experimental films as *Serene Velocity* and *Wavelength*. It can happen in more straightforward narratives, too. In 6.144 and 6.145, a cut from a washline to a living room acts as a transition between scenes. But the cut is of interest for other reasons, too, since we don't expect a narrative film to treat objects as flat patches of color to be matched across shots. This sort of attention to graphic play is more common in abstract form.

In this passage from Ozu's *Ohayo*, a stylistic choice becomes salient because it goes beyond its narrative function. Even here, though, stylistic patterns continue to call on the viewer's expectations and to draw the spectator into a dynamic process. Anyone who notices the graphic match on red objects in *Ohayo* will most likely be intrigued at such an unconventional way of editing. And, if stylistic patterns do swerve off on their own, we still need a sense of the film's narrative organization to show how and when that happens.



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In "Alignment, allegiance, and murder," we consider how staging, camera position, and cutting blend to create a play of point-of-view in a scene.

4. What Functions Do the Techniques and Patterns Fulfill?

Now we look for the role that style plays in the film's overall form. Does the use of music or noise alter our attitude toward a character? Does the composition of the shot tend to make us concentrate on a particular detail (4.153, the shot of Anne's face in *Day of Wrath*)? Does the use of camera movement hold off story information to create suspense, as in the opening of *Touch of Evil* (pp. 213–215)? Does the use of discontinuous editing cue us to create thematic comparisons, as in the sequence we analyzed in *October* (pp. 259–262)?

A direct route to noticing function is to notice the *effects* of the film on our viewing experience. Style may enhance *emotional* aspects of the film. Rapid cutting in *The Birds* triggers shock, while the solo piano score in *The Conversation* underlines Harry's melancholy and loneliness. The sadness of Elsa's life with her daughter in *Grand Illusion* is conveyed by the tracking shot to the table that is "too large," especially when we compare that shot with Rauffenstein's conscription of a chapel for his quarters (5.183–5.193). Style is intimately tied to the emotions that the film expresses and that it can engender in the viewer.

Style also shapes *meaning*. Eisenstein clearly wants us to take away a message from the *October* sequence: The Provisional Government is dictatorial, oppressing both the families at home and the soldiers on the front. We should, however, avoid reading isolated elements atomistically, taking them out of context. As we noted on p. 190, a high angle does not automatically mean "defeat," just as a low angle does not automatically mean "power." Thematic interpretation can be sensitive to contexts—the particular scene, the whole film, the patterns of techniques, and the overall effects.

Meaning is only one type of effect, and there is no reason to expect that every stylistic feature will yield thematic significance. One part of a director's job is to direct our attention, and so style will often function simply *perceptually*—to get us to notice things, to emphasize one thing over another, to clarify, intensify, or complicate our understanding of the action. One shot in *Red Beard* makes the woman patient seem close to the young doctor, but another corrects that impression (5.39, 5.40). Here, as often happens, film style is readjusting the story information we're getting, guiding our uptake moment by moment.

One way to sharpen our sense of the functions of specific techniques is to *imagine alternatives* and reflect on what differences would result. Suppose the director had made a different technical choice. How would this create a different effect?

Our Hospitality creates its gags by putting two elements into the same shot and letting us observe the comic juxtaposition. Suppose Keaton had instead isolated each element in a single shot and then linked the two elements by editing. The basic information might be the same, but our response would be different. Instead of a simultaneous presentation that lets our attention shuttle to and fro, we would have a more step-by-step pattern of building up the gags and paying them off. Or, suppose that John Huston had handled the opening scene of *The Maltese Falcon* as a single take with camera movement. How would he then have drawn our attention to Brigid O'Shaughnessy's and Sam Spade's facial reactions, and how would this have affected our expectations? By focusing on effects and imagining alternatives to the technical choices that were made, the analyst can gain a sharp sense of the particular functions of style in the given film.

The rest of this chapter provides three illustrations of how we can analyze film style. First we concentrate on a single scene, from Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt*. (See "A Closer Look.") This will show you how all the techniques we've surveyed can work together to create a specific attitude toward a character and a phase of story action. Even though we focus on one scene, our analysis has to take other scenes, and the film's overall narrative form, into account.



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For a discussion of how various techniques of film style can function to call our attention to items of narrative importance, see "Gradation of emphasis, starring Glenn Ford."

“There's no scene in any movie that 50 different directors couldn't have done 50 different ways.”

—Paul Mazursky, director



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For another example of Hitchcock's style, see "Sir Alfred simply must have his set pieces."



A CLOSER LOOK

Stylistic Synthesis in *Shadow of a Doubt*

Uncle Charlie has come to visit his sister's family in Santa Rosa, California. Charlie is a suave, sophisticated man who flashes money around freely. His sister Emmy adores him and has even named her daughter Charlie in his honor. But as Uncle Charlie lingers in town, Young Charlie begins to suspect that he's a serial killer who preys on rich widows. She can't prove it—she has only the shadow of a doubt—but she now sees his menacing side. In many scenes, Hitchcock organizes film style to link our perception and understanding of events to those of Young Charlie.

A decisive moment in this progression comes in a scene of the family having dinner. Uncle Charlie praises small-town living. Towns like Santa Rosa, he says, keep their women busy, while cities let them sink into self-indulgence. He slips into a venomous monologue:

And what do the wives do, these useless women? You see them in the hotels, the best hotels, every day by the thousands. Drinking the money, eating the money, losing the money at bridge, playing all day and all night. Smelling of money. Proud of their jewelry but nothing else. Horrible . . . fat, faded, greedy women.

Reacting to this, Young Charlie blurts out, "But they're alive! They're human beings!" Uncle Charlie replies, "Are they? Are they, Charlie? Are they human or are they fat, wheezing animals?" As if realizing he's gone too far, Uncle Charlie smiles and switches back to his ingratiating manner.

This powerful scene depends on many stylistic decisions about how to affect the audience. The dialogue constitutes a step in the process of strengthening Young Charlie's suspicions that her uncle is a murderer. The scene nudges us closer to the same belief. The scene also suggests that Uncle Charlie is slightly mad; his killing proceeds not only from lust for money but also from a deep-seated hatred of women. His harangue gives us

a better understanding of his personality. Our response has an emotional dimension, too, since his description of the women dehumanizes them to chilling effect.

Within the context of the film, this scene serves several functions. The development of the story depends on Uncle Charlie's visit to his family and Young Charlie's growing suspicions about his murderous instincts. She can't tell anyone the truth, though, since doing so would devastate her mother. This creates a powerful conflict, not only between Young Charlie and her uncle but also within her mind. Similarly, as she learns the truth, her attitude changes. Initially, she worships her uncle, but eventually, she becomes bitterly aware of his real nature, and her trust in the world starts to crack. The dinner scene, then, contributes to a growth in Young Charlie's character.

Even the fact that the scene occurs at dinner is important. More cheerful scenes have taken place at the same table. At one point, Uncle Charlie gives Emmy restored photographs of their parents, which seems to convey his sincere love for her and their family. Young Charlie is exuberant (8.11). In these early scenes, we're told of a special rapport that uncle and niece share, and he even presents her with an elegant ring (8.12). The ring plays an important role in the plot, since Young Charlie discovers an inscription on it (a clue that it came from one of her uncle's victims). So Uncle Charlie's hate-filled monologue fits into a pattern of other moments we've already seen.

Hitchcock firmly believed in using the medium to arouse the viewer's mind and feelings. So, as Uncle Charlie launches into his monologue, Hitchcock presents us with an establishing shot of the entire table (8.13). We've seen similar shots in earlier scenes, and it orients us to the positions of the scene's major characters. At the same time, Hitchcock stages the scene so that Uncle Charlie rather than Emmy's husband sits at the head of

the table. His domination of the household is presented visually. As Charlie starts to talk, after a shot of Emmy we get a brief shot of Young Charlie, eying him anxiously (8.14). When he begins to denounce the "useless women," we see a close view of him as he continues his attack (8.15).

Joseph Cotten's performance is very important here. He seethes with resentment of the "fat, faded, greedy women." He delivers the speech without blinking, as if musing to himself rather than talking to others. Hitchcock magnifies the effect of Cotten's performance with a tracking shot that eliminates everyone else at the table. The camera comes steadily forward, filling the frame with Uncle Charlie's face as his monologue increases in anger and intensity (8.16).

Hitchcock could have used other techniques. He could have filmed Uncle Charlie from the rear, concealing his face but showing us the reactions of others at the table. He could have interrupted shots of Uncle Charlie with the reactions of Emmy, her husband, and her children. But Hitchcock achieves a very different effect by the slow, riveting movement toward Uncle Charlie's face as his hatred for women surfaces. Even though he's speaking the lines aloud, the relentless forward tracking movement suggests that we're getting a glimpse into his mind.

When Young Charlie objects, "But they're alive! They're human beings!" most directors would have cut

to a shot of her. But Hitchcock keeps her outburst off-screen. Then he adds an unexpected and eerie touch. As the tracking shot ends on an extremely tight close-up, Uncle Charlie turns slightly and looks into the camera as he replies, "Are they, Charlie?" (8.17).

Suddenly, we're put in the young woman's place, seeing the full force of her uncle's hatred. (We've just seen Jonathan Demme employing a comparable technique in filming Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*, 8.7–8.10.) Like Young Charlie, we begin to realize that he's a sociopath, made all the more frightening by his steady gaze and controlled speech. Hitchcock's decisions about staging, framing, sound, and editing have intensely engaged our minds and emotions in the story.

Hitchcock's style here is related to technical choices in the movie as a whole. For one thing, the shot of Uncle Charlie is the closest we ever come to him, so this tight framing gives the scene particular force. More generally, Hitchcock employs techniques that put us in the position of the characters. Throughout the film, he uses optical point of view, most often allowing us to share Young Charlie's vantage point (8.18, 8.19).

This pattern of stylistic choices is sustained throughout the dinner table monologue. The brief shot of Young Charlie reminds us of her position beside her uncle (8.14). But rather than have Uncle Charlie start his monologue



8.11 In *Shadow of a Doubt*, Young Charlie is delighted when Uncle Charlie presents pictures of her grandparents.



8.12 In an eerie parallel to a lovers' engagement, Uncle Charlie presents his niece with a ring.



8.13 A general shot shows the family at table, with the two Charlies most visible.



8.14 After a shot of Emmy, Hitchcock cuts to Young Charlie looking uneasily at her uncle.



8.15 Uncle Charlie begins his monologue about useless women.



8.16 The camera moves closer to him . . .



8.17 . . . and is very close when he turns and replies to Young Charlie's protests that these women are human. "Are they, Charlie?"



8.18 Earlier in the film, when Young Charlie has begun to suspect her uncle, she pauses on the front doorstep.



8.19 Hitchcock then gives us an optical point-of-view shot of what makes her hesitate: Uncle Charlie holding her mother spellbound.



A CLOSER LOOK

Continued

by glancing at her, Hitchcock lets him speak to the others at the table, or perhaps merely to himself (8.15, 8.16). Only after Young Charlie's offscreen outburst does Uncle Charlie turn to her—and us (8.17). Hitchcock has saved the most startling point-of-view moment for the end of the shot.

The style of this scene enhances the film's pattern of restricted narration. After Uncle Charlie arrives in Santa Rosa, we get some private glimpses into his activities, but the scenes concentrate largely on Emmy's family and particularly on Young Charlie. We know a bit more than she knows about her uncle. For example, from the start, we suspect that he's being sought by the police, but we don't know what they're investigating. Later

we learn that Uncle Charlie has torn a story out of the newspaper, but not until Young Charlie finds it do we discover what he was trying to conceal. Slowly, along with Young Charlie, we discover that the Merry Widow Murderer is at large and that Uncle Charlie is a prime suspect.

The overall form of the plot and the stylistic presentation in each scene work to put us close to Young Charlie. We know roughly what she knows, and we learn some key information when she does. In the dinner table scene, the developing storyline and Hitchcock's style combine to tie us even more tightly to Young Charlie. The moment when Uncle Charlie turns challengingly to the camera becomes a high point of this pattern.

Our second example is *Citizen Kane*. Chapter 3 discussed the film's narrative organization, and we'll refer back to that to ground our comments. (You may want to return to reread it as preparation for what follows.) Our analysis will concentrate on identifying some salient techniques, locating stylistic patterns, and proposing some functions for the patterns we detect. At the end of this chapter, as our third example, we consider how *Gravity* creates stylistic patterns using digital tools to enhance traditional technique.

Style in *Citizen Kane*

Orson Welles didn't make *Citizen Kane* alone. He had at his disposal a major Hollywood studio, RKO, and he assembled exceptionally gifted collaborators. Just as the film's narrative organization owes a good deal to the screenplay that Welles wrote with Joseph Mankiewicz, its style is the result of thousands of decisions made by director, cast, and crew.

Several of Welles' actors had worked with him in theater and radio, so he knew what they could bring to the project. Among other talents were cinematographer Gregg Toland, composer Bernard Herrmann, and special-effects supervisor Vernon Walker. All three had distinguished careers before and after *Kane*. Walker created dazzling special effects for 1930s musicals and comedies. Toland's style helped popularize the deep-focus look during the 1940s, while Herrmann worked frequently with Hitchcock, notably on *Psycho*.

Welles had unusual directorial control over the project, so he could ask his colleagues to execute his ideas. At the same time, he could encourage their suggestions. For instance, *Kane* allowed Toland to push further his experiments in deep-focus cinematography. Ultimately, it was Welles' responsibility to decide how to blend all these contributions into the film that became *Citizen Kane*. The result harmonizes the various techniques in ways that sometimes brashly, sometimes subtly, shape our experience as viewers.

Mystery and the Penetration of Space

In analyzing *Citizen Kane*'s narrative, we discovered that the film is organized as a search (p. 100). A detective-like figure, the reporter Thompson, tries to find the significance of Kane's last word, "Rosebud." But even before Thompson appears as a character, the film's narration invites us to ask questions about Kane and to seek the answers.

The very beginning of the film sets up a mystery. After a fade-in reveals a "No Trespassing" sign, in a series of craning movements upward, the camera travels over a set of fences, all matched graphically in the slow dissolves that link the shots. There follows a series of shots of a huge estate, always with the great house in the distance (8.20). The gloomy lighting, the deserted setting, and the ominous music give the opening of the film the eerie uncertainty that we associate with tales of mystery and horror. These opening shots are connected by dissolves, making the camera seem to draw closer to the house although there is no forward camera movement. From shot to shot, the foreground changes, yet the lighted window remains in almost exactly the same position on the screen. Graphically matching the window from shot to shot already focuses our attention on it; we assume that whatever is in that room will be important in initiating the story.

At several points later in the film, the camera moves toward things that might reveal the secrets of Kane's character. One instance is in the spectacular crane up the side of a nightclub to a skylight as Thompson goes to interview Susan Alexander (8.21–8.24). As the camera reaches the skylight, a dissolve and a crack of lightning shift the scene inside to another craning movement down to Susan's table.



8.20 The opening of *Citizen Kane*. At the film's start, dissolving views bring us closer to Xanadu. This sequence depends largely on special effects. The house itself is a series of paintings, combined through matte work with three-dimensional miniatures in the foreground.



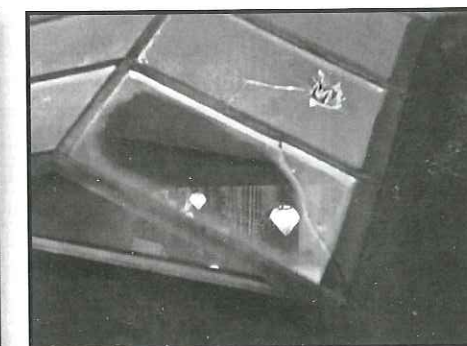
8.21



8.22



8.23



8.24

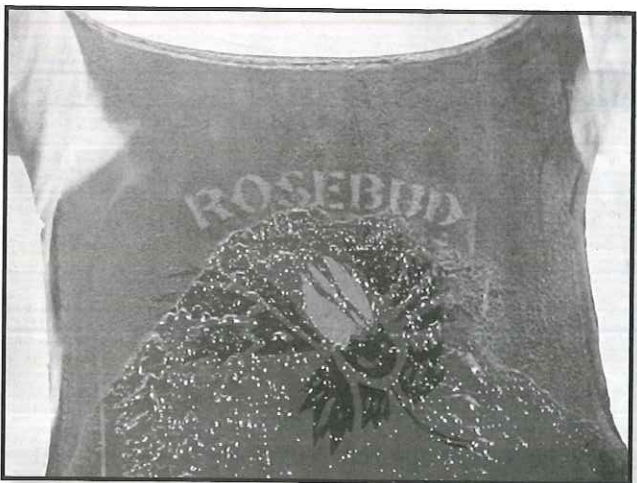
8.21–8.24 Exploring the mystery, advancing into space. As this scene begins, the camera frames a poster of Susan Alexander on an outside wall of the nightclub (8.21). The camera cranes up the wall toward the roof (8.22). The camera continues its advance through the "El Rancho" sign (8.23) and over to the skylight (8.24). Some of these camera movements were created through laboratory special effects.



8.25



8.26



8.27

8.25–8.27 The final camera movement. A crane shot near the end (8.25) moves down to center on Kane's sled (8.26). Another forward camera movement brings the sled into close-up (8.27). Interestingly, the original program booklet for *Kane* included a section called "Star Orson Welles Makes Fluid Camera the Star of 'Citizen Kane'."

The opening scene and the introduction to El Rancho have some striking similarities. Each begins with a sign ("No Trespassing" and the publicity poster), and each moves us into a building to reveal a new character. The first scene uses a series of shots, whereas the second depends more on camera movement, but these different techniques are working to create a consistent pattern of penetration that becomes part of the film's style. Later, Thompson's second visit to Susan at the club repeats the crane shots of the first. The second flashback of Jed Leland's story begins with yet another movement into a scene. The camera is initially pointed at wet cobblestones. Then it tilts up and tracks in toward Susan coming out of a drugstore. Only then does the camera pan right to reveal Kane standing, splashed with mud, on the curb. This pattern of gradual movement into the story space not only suits the narrative's search pattern but also creates curiosity and suspense.

Films' endings often contain variations of their beginnings. Toward the end of *Citizen Kane*, Thompson gives up his search for Rosebud. But after the reporters leave the huge storeroom of Xanadu, the camera begins to move over the great expanse of Kane's collections. It cranes forward high above the crates and piles of objects (8.25), then moves down to center on the sled from Kane's childhood (8.26). After a cut to the furnace, the camera again moves in on the sled as it is tossed into the fire. At last we are able to read the word "Rosebud" on the sled (8.27). The ending continues the pattern set up at the beginning; the film techniques create a penetration into the story space, probing the mystery of the central character.

After our glimpse of the sled, however, the film reverses the pattern. A series of shots linked by dissolves leads us back outside Xanadu, the camera travels down to the "No Trespassing" sign again, and we are left to wonder whether this discovery really provides a resolution to the mystery about Kane's character. Now the beginning and the ending explicitly echo each other.

Style and Narration: Restriction and Objectivity

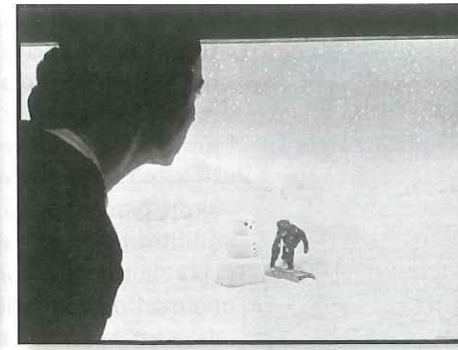
Our study of *Citizen Kane's* organization (pp. 108–109) showed that Thompson's search is presented through a fairly complex narrational strategy. At one level, our knowledge is restricted principally to what Kane's acquaintances know about him. Within the flashbacks, the style avoids crosscutting or other techniques that would move toward a more unrestricted range of knowledge. Many of the flashback scenes are shot in fairly static long takes, strictly confining us to what participants could know. When the youthful Kane confronts Thatcher during the *Inquirer* crusade, Welles could have cut away to the reporter in Cuba sending Kane a telegram or could have shown a montage sequence of a day in the life of the paper. Instead, because this is Thatcher's tale, Welles handles the scene in a long take showing Kane and Thatcher in a face-to-face standoff, which is then capped by a close-up of Kane's cocky response.



8.28



8.30



8.29



8.31

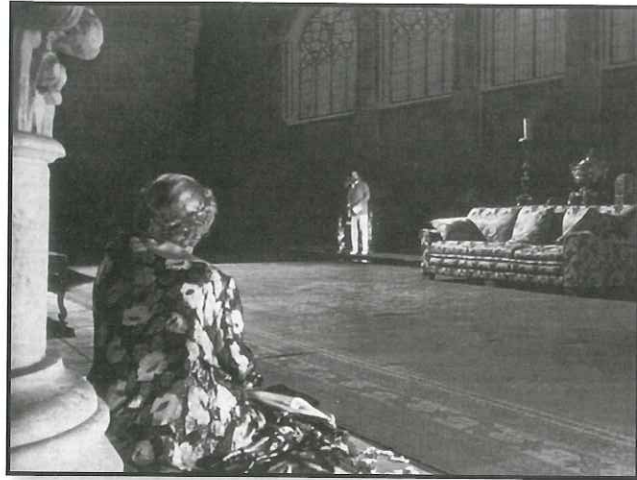
8.28–8.31 Deep-focus for objectivity and simultaneous action. The principal shot in *Citizen Kane's* childhood scene begins as a long shot of the young Kane at play in the snow (8.28). This becomes an interior view as the camera reveals a window, with Kane's mother appearing at the left and calling to him (8.29). The camera tracks back with Mrs. Kane (8.30) and keeps the boy in extreme long shot throughout the rest of the scene (8.31). Although the cabin interior is rendered in photographic deep focus, the image of the boy Charles is a rear projection, creating another layer of depth.

We've also seen that *Kane's* narration requires us to take each narrator's version as objective within his or her limited knowledge. Welles reinforces this by avoiding shots that suggest optical or mental subjectivity. As usual, once a filmmaker commits to one creative option, this excludes other possibilities. By contrast, Hitchcock favors POV cutting in *The Birds* and *Rear Window* (pp. 222–223 and 241–242), which militate against the long-take option Welles pursues.

Welles' commitment to an external perspective on the action is also evident in his choice of deep-focus cinematography. The shot in which Kane's mother signs her son over to Thatcher is a good example. After some shots showing him playing in the snow, we get what at first seems a simple long shot of the boy (8.28). Soon, however, the camera is tracking back and following the adults to a table (8.29, 8.30), where they settle the guardianship. Mrs. Kane and Thatcher sit at a table in the foreground to sign the papers, while Kane's father remains standing farther away at the left, and the boy plays in the distance (8.31).

By eliminating cutting here, Welles captures a complex, developing stretch of the drama, like the opening of *Touch of Evil* discussed on pp. 213–215. Most Hollywood directors would have handled this scene in shot/reverse shot, but Welles keeps all the implications of the action before us throughout. The boy, who is the subject of the discussion, remains framed in the distant window through the whole scene, unaware of what the adults are doing.

The tensions between the father and the mother are conveyed straightforwardly: Mrs. Kane excludes him from the discussion at the table. The sound plays a while as well. Mr. Kane's objections to signing his son away mix in with the dialogue in the foreground, and even the boy's shouts (ironically, "The Union Forever!") can be heard in the distance. The framing also emphasizes the mother in much of the scene. This is her only appearance in the film. Her severity and clamped-down emotions help motivate the many events that follow from her action here. We have had little introduction to the family before this scene, but the combination of sound, cinematography, and mise-en-scene conveys the complicated action with an overall objectivity.



8.32 Depth and centering. Although Susan is much larger than Kane in this shot, his placement in frame center, as well as his frontal position, assure that we will look at him. The main purpose of the shot seems to be to emphasize that the vast spaces of Xanadu reflect their emotional distance from one another.

Every director directs our attention, but Welles does so in unusual ways. *Citizen Kane* offers a good example of how a director can choose between stylistic alternatives. In the scenes that avoid cutting, Welles cues our attention by using deep-space mise-en-scene (figure behavior, lighting, placement in space) and sound. We can watch expressions because the actors play frontally (8.27). In addition, the framing emphasizes certain figures by putting them in the foreground or in the center (8.32). And, of course, our attention shifts from one character to another as they speak lines, as Tim Smith's eye-tracking study shows (p. 140). Avoiding the classical Hollywood shot/reverse shot, Welles uses other techniques to prompt us to build up the story.

Style and Narration: Omniscience

Citizen Kane's narration also embeds the narrators' objective but restricted versions of events within broader contexts. Thompson's investigation links the various tales, so we learn substantially what he learns. Yet he must not become the protagonist of the film, for that would remove Kane from

the center of interest. Welles makes a crucial stylistic choice here. By the use of low-key selective lighting and patterns of staging and framing, Thompson is made virtually unidentifiable. His back is to us, he's tucked into the corner of the frame, and he's usually in darkness. The stylistic handling makes him the neutral investigator, less a character than a channel for information.

More broadly still, we have seen that the film encloses Thompson's search and each narrator's recollection within a more omniscient narration. Our discussion of the opening shots of Xanadu is relevant here. In the gradual approach to Xanadu, film style is used to convey a high degree of knowledge that no character has. When we enter Kane's death chamber, the style suggests even more—that the narration can plumb characters' minds. We see shots of snow covering the frame (for example, 8.33), which hint at a subjective vision. Later in the film, the camera movements occasionally remind us of the broader range of narrational knowledge, as in the first version of Susan's opera premiere, shown during Leland's story in segment 6. There the camera moves to reveal something neither Leland nor Susan could know about (8.34–8.36). The final sequence, which at least partially solves the mystery of "Rosebud," also uses a vast camera movement to give us an omniscient perspective. The camera cranes over objects from Kane's collection, moving forward in space but backward through Kane's life to concentrate on his earliest memento, the sled. Again a salient technique conforms to pattern by giving us knowledge no character will ever possess.

Narrative Parallels: Settings

In looking at the development of the film's narrative (pp.108–109), we saw that Kane changes from an idealistic young man to a friendless recluse. The film contrasts Kane's early life as a newspaper publisher and his later withdrawal from public life. This contrast is most readily apparent in the settings. The *Inquirer* office is initially an efficient but cluttered place. When Kane takes over, he creates a casual atmosphere by moving in his furniture and living in the office. The low camera angles tend to emphasize the office's thin pillars and low ceilings, which are white and evenly, brightly lit. Xanadu, in contrast, is huge and sparsely furnished (8.32). The ceilings are too high to be seen in most shots, and the few furnishings stand far apart. The lighting often strikes figures

strongly from the back or side, creating a few patches of hard light in the midst of general darkness. The expanded collection of antiquities and mementos now is housed in colossal storerooms.

The contrast between the *Inquirer* office and Xanadu is also created by the sound techniques associated with each locale. Several scenes at the newspaper office (Kane's initial arrival and his return from Europe) involve a dense sound mix with a babble of overlapping voices. Yet the cramped space is suggested by the relative lack of resonance in timbre. In Xanadu, however, the conversations sound very different. Kane and Susan speak to each other slowly, with pauses between. Moreover, their voices have a booming echo effect that combines with the setting and lighting to suggest huge, empty space.

This transition from Kane's newspaper days to his eventual seclusion at Xanadu is suggested by changes in the mise-en-scene at the *Inquirer*. While Kane is in Europe, the paintings and statues he sends back begin to fill up his small office. The new clutter hints at Kane's growing ambitions and declining interest in working personally on his newspaper. This change culminates in the last scene in the *Inquirer* office—Leland's confrontation with Kane. The office is being used as a campaign headquarters. With the desks pushed aside and the employees gone, the room looks larger and emptier than it had before. Welles emphasizes this by placing the camera at floor level and shooting from a low angle (5.113). The Chicago *Inquirer* office, with its deep, shadowy spaces, pushes this pattern further (8.37), as do later conversation scenes in the caverns of Xanadu (8.32).

Contrast these scenes with one near the end of the film. The reporters invade Kane's museum-like storeroom at Xanadu (8.38). Although the echoes remind us of the estate's vastness, the reporters transform the setting briefly by the same sort of dense, overlapping dialogue that characterized the early *Inquirer* scenes and the scene after the newsreel. By bringing together these reporters and Kane's final surroundings, the film creates another parallel emphasizing the changes in the protagonist.

Parallels: Other Techniques

Parallels are important throughout *Citizen Kane*, and most of the techniques chosen by Welles, Toland, and their colleagues help create them. For example, deep focus and deep space can pack many characters into the frame in order to summon up similarities and contrasts. Late in Thatcher's account (segment 4), a scene presents Kane's financial losses in the Depression. He is forced to sign over his newspaper to Thatcher's bank. In a single take, a turning point in the plot is created by the arrangement of the figures and the image's depth of field (8.39, 8.40). The lowering of the contract recalls the previous scene, when Thatcher puts down the newspaper that has concealed him (8.41, 8.42). There Thatcher had been annoyed, but Kane could defy him. Years later in the story, Thatcher has gained control and Kane paces restlessly, still defiant but stripped of his power over the *Inquirer* chain.

Editing patterns can also suggest similarities between scenes, as when Welles compares two moments in which Kane seems to win public support. In the first scene, Kane is running for governor and makes a speech at a mammoth rally. This scene is principally organized around an editing pattern that shows one or two shots of Kane speaking, then one or two close shots of small groups of characters in the audience (Emily and their son, Leland, Bernstein, Gettys), then another shot of Kane. The cutting establishes the characters who are important for their views of Kane. Boss Gettys is the last to be shown in the scene, and we expect him to retaliate against Kane's denunciation.

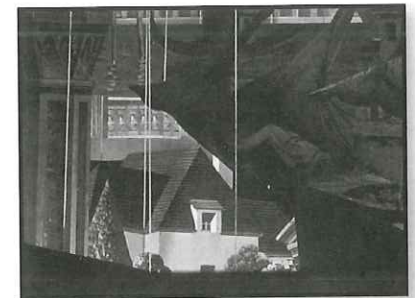
After his defeat, Kane sets out to make Susan a successful singer, not because she wants it but because she will be an extension of him. "We're going to be a great opera star," he promises a reporter. In Susan's debut, the organization of shots follows the pattern of the campaign rally. Again the figure on the stage, Susan,



8.33



8.34

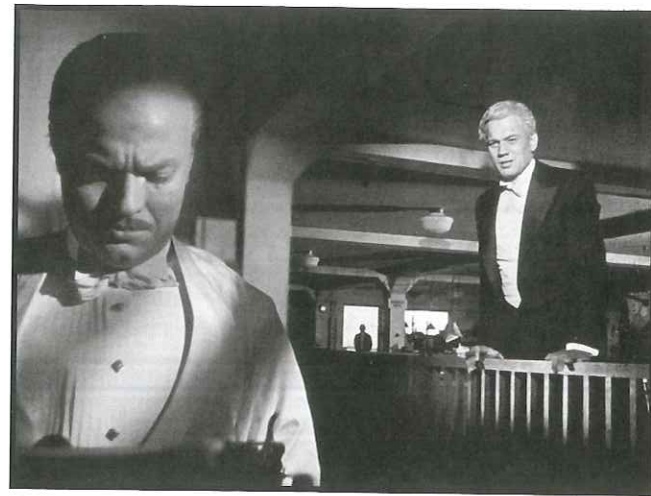


8.35



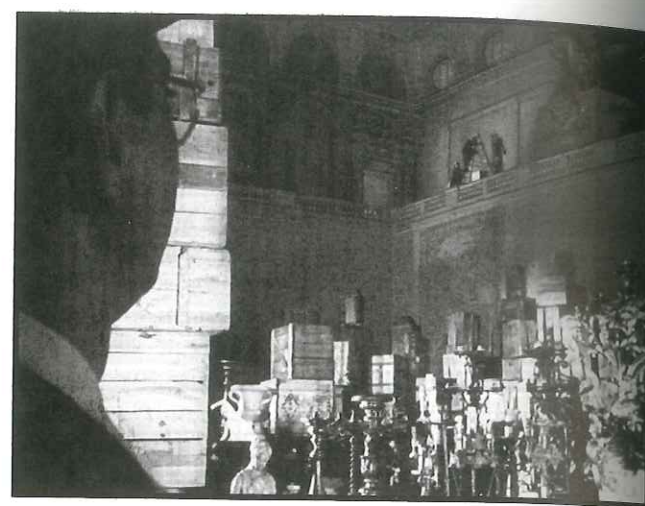
8.36

8.33–8.36 Wide-ranging narration at work. The snowstorm paperweight is itself bathed in fluttering snowflakes, suggesting a mental vision (8.33). In the film's first opera scene, the camera cranes up from the stage (8.34) and through the rigging above (8.35) to reveal a stagehand indicating that Susan's singing stinks (8.36).



8.37

8.37–8.38 Depth and cavernous spaces. In *Citizen Kane*, rear projection exaggerates the depth of the *Inquirer* office. Welles as Kane performed at the foreground typewriter, while wide-angle, deep-focus footage of Joseph Cotten (Leland) and Everett Sloane (Bernstein) was projected behind him (8.37). Extreme deep focus, also possibly enhanced by back projection, is employed in the final scene in Xanadu's warehouse, which is enlivened by rapid dialogue (8.38).



8.38

serves as a pivot for the editing, with shots of her alternating with shots of the listeners (Bernstein, Leland, the singing teacher, and above all Kane) (8.43, 8.44). The general narrative parallels are sharpened by specific stylistic techniques. Together they articulate two stages of Kane's power quest: first his own attempt and then with Susan as his proxy.

Parallels can be brought out by music as well. Susan's singing is causally central to the narrative, for it propels her to the limelight with Kane as her backer;



8.39

8.39–8.42 Parallel gestures underscored by deep space. The contract scene opens with a close-up of Kane's manager, Bernstein, reading the contract (8.39). He lowers the paper to reveal Thatcher, now much older, seated opposite him. We hear Kane's voice offscreen, and Bernstein moves his head slightly, the camera reframing a little. Now we see Kane pacing beyond them in a huge office or boardroom (8.40). This shot echoes the composition of an earlier scene (8.41), which dramatizes our first real look at Kane as an adult (8.42). Here he is a far more commanding figure; in 8.40, after losing his newspaper empire, he has shrunk.



8.40



8.41



8.42

her failure becomes another phase of his failure. Musically, Susan's elaborate aria in *Salammbô* contrasts sharply with the other main diegetic music, the party song about "Charlie Kane." But both relate to Kane's ambitions. The lyrics of the "Charlie Kane" ditty show that Kane intends it as his signature song, and it does turn up later as campaign music. In addition, the chorus girls who sing the song wear costumes with boots and Rough Rider hats (8.45). Kane's desire for war with Spain has shown up even in this apparently simple farewell party for his departure to Europe. When Kane's political ambitions are dashed, he tries to create a career for his wife instead, but her voice falters in singing grand opera. The songs cooperate with other techniques in creating parallels between phases of Kane's career.

A Convincing Newsreel

The "News on the March" sequence is crucial to the film. It fills us in about Kane's background, and it provides a map of the upcoming plot events (pp. 103–104). Also, we need to believe that this is a real newsreel in order to motivate Thompson's search for the key to Kane's life. A plausible-looking newsreel sequence also helps establish Kane's power and wealth, which will be the basis of much of the upcoming action.

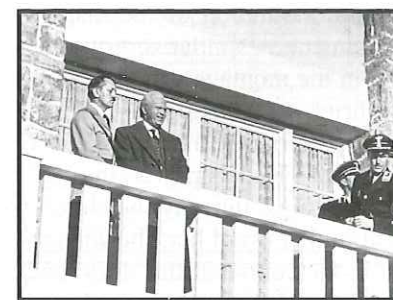
Welles sets off this sequence by techniques that don't appear elsewhere in *Citizen Kane*. These techniques imitate the look and sound of documentary footage of the period. The music and the voice-over commentary recall actual newsreels, and the insert titles, outmoded in fictional films, were still a convention of documentaries. Welles uses several different film stocks to make it appear that the shots have been assembled from widely different sources. Some shots copy the jerkiness of silent film run at sound speed. Welles also scratched and faded this footage to give it the look of old, worn film. This distressing of the footage, combined with the makeup work, creates a remarkable impression that Kane was a historical figure. We see him with major political leaders (8.46), and glimpse him wheeled around his estate (8.47). The visual conventions are enhanced by the use of a narrator whose booming voice mimics (and mocks) the commentary typical in newsreels of the day.

Plot Time through Editing

One of *Citizen Kane*'s outstanding formal features is the way its plot manipulates story time (pp. 101–102). This process is motivated by Thompson's inquiry and the order in which he interviews Kane's acquaintances (p. 104). Welles and his collaborators selected a variety of techniques to signal shifts from scene to scene, creating both ellipses and rearrangements of story chronology.



8.45



8.46



8.47

8.45–8.47 Kane in history. The chorus girls, bearing hats modeled on Teddy Roosevelt's Rough Riders, clap them on the partying journalists' heads (8.45). In "News on the March," simulated newsreel footage shows Kane visiting world leaders like Hitler (8.46). After Kane becomes a recluse, the handheld camera, the barriers, and the ill-composed framing imitate covertly shot footage (8.47).



8.43



8.44

8.43–8.44 Editing parallels opera and politics. Susan's opera debut repeats the editing pattern of Kane's campaign rally. Shots of Susan onstage (8.43) are followed by shots of listeners, most notably her brooding and domineering puppet master (8.44).



8.48 Editing for shock. After Raymond says, "Like the time his wife left him," a quick dissolve is underscored by a cockatoo's shriek and an abrupt close-up, starting the scene at a high dramatic and auditory pitch.

Perhaps the most startling transitional device for 1941 audiences was the *shock cut*. A shock cut creates a jarring juxtaposition, usually by means of a sudden shift to a higher sound volume and a considerable graphic discontinuity. *Citizen Kane* offers several instances: the abrupt beginning of the newsreel after the lingering deathbed image, the leap from the quiet conversation in the newsreel projection room to the lightning and thunder outside El Rancho, and the sudden appearance of a screeching cockatoo in the foreground as Raymond's flashback begins (8.48). The shock cuts create surprise and sharply mark off certain scenes. Somewhat milder shock cuts occur within scenes as well, creating tension and edginess. The newsreel comes to an abrupt, skidding halt and during the scene in which Susan berates Kane for sending Leland a \$25,000 check, her shrill demands, "What?" "What is it?" are accentuated by abrupt sound cuts and brief shots.

Some transitions that skip over or drastically compress time are less abrupt than the harsh sound and image cuts. Kane's sled is covered by snow through a languid series of dissolves. More extensively, the breakfast table montage (segment 6) shows, with big ellipses, the decline of Kane's first marriage. It starts with the loving couple at their early wedding breakfast, rendered in a track-in and a shot/reverse-shot series. Then the sequence moves through several brief episodes, consisting of shot/reverse-shot exchanges linked by superimpositions of lighted windows whizzing by. (The effect resembles the transitional device of the *whip pan*, a fast panning movement.) In each episode, Kane and Emily become more sharply hostile. The segment ends by tracking away to show the surprising distance between them at the table, using spatial distance to indicate emotional distance in the way that will be developed in scenes with Kane's second wife Susan (8.32).

Composer Bernard Herrmann also guided our experience of the breakfast-table montage. The romantic breakfast is accompanied by a lilting waltz. At each shift, the music changes. A comic variation of the waltz follows, and then a tense one; then horns and trumpets restate the Kane theme. The payoff of the sequence shows the couple eating in stony silence, with Emily ostentatiously reading a rival newspaper. That passage is accompanied by a slow, eerie variation on the initial theme. The dissolution of the marriage is stressed by this theme-and-variations accompaniment. A similar sort of temporal compression and sonic elaboration can be found in the montage of Susan's opera career (segment 7).

Our brief examination of *Citizen Kane*'s style has pointed out only a few of the major patterns in the film. You can find others. There's the musical motif associated with Kane's power; the "K" motif appearing in Kane's costumes and in Xanadu's settings; the way the childish decor of Susan's room in Xanadu reveals Kane's attitude toward her; the changes in the actors' performances as the characters age in the course of the story; and the striking photographic devices, such as the photos that become animated or the many superimpositions during montage sequences.

Critics have argued that the film's stylistic richness, along with its complex narrative structure, works somewhat against our feeling much for its protagonist. Kane, seen mostly from the outside by those who knew him, is an object of

admiration or dislike, but never real sympathy. (For a more intensely emotional film, we must go to Welles' next film, *The Magnificent Ambersons*.) Is *Citizen Kane* then a cold intellectual exercise? Our analysis of the film's form and style suggests that an emotional distance on Kane is exactly what Welles and his collaborators were aiming at. Through the flashback structure and the omniscient but detached narration, we're asked to judge him from the outside—or rather, given the revelation of the Rosebud sled, to suspend final judgment on a figure we can't fully understand. "I don't think any word can explain a man's life," says Thompson.

Yet one implication of the revelation of Rosebud is that old age leaves one reflecting on what might have been. Bernstein talks of recalling a girl in a white dress, and Leland remembers Kane's first wife Emily from dancing school. The snowstorm paperweight that Kane drops as he dies is a motif recalling not only the Kane family cabin and the boy's games in the snow but also his failure to find new happiness with Susan (8.49, 8.50). The film's formal and stylistic dynamics grant some sympathy for an arrogant, self-centered man. Even so forbidding a figure as Charles Foster Kane can cherish a fleeting memory of a moment in childhood just before his world changed forever.



8.49



8.50

8.49–8.50 Pieces in a puzzle. The snowstorm paperweight on Susan's dressing table, the night Kane meets her (8.49). The globe is center left, just in front of the girl's picture. Note that Welles doesn't cut in to a close-up emphasizing this; many viewers probably don't notice it, or the picture of Susan as a child behind the paperweight. In addition, when Susan says that her mother wanted her to become a singer, she says softly, "You know how mothers are." Years later Susan leaves Kane, and after he has wrecked her room in a fury, he picks up the glass ball and sorrowfully murmurs, "Rosebud" (8.50). The word evokes not only her departure and the sled we see at the film's end but the whole cluster of childhood imagery that is presented in Thatcher's flashback. At this point, it seems, Kane has lost everything and his retreat from the world becomes complete.



A CLOSER LOOK

Gravity: Film Style in the Digital Age

We've seen throughout this part that traditional film techniques survive in digital cinema. Mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound remain central to filmmaking. Digital tools have allowed filmmakers to expand these techniques. Now roaring monsters and flying superheroes seem more convincing than ever. Going beyond fantasy special effects, however, digital technology can help a film achieve a distinctive style.

Gravity's story could easily have been conceived in the predigital age. A space walk involving three astronauts turns disastrous when hurtling space debris slams into them. One man is killed, and the protagonist, Dr. Ryan Stone, is sent spinning into space. Matt Kowalski, a veteran astronaut, rescues her. His jet-pack allows the two to travel short distances.

Their goal is to get back to earth, and the bulk of the plot shows the setbacks they encounter in their search for a re-entry vehicle. First they head toward their space shuttle, but they find it irreparably damaged. They must go on to the International Space Station (ISS). Although Kowalski dies in the attempt, Stone makes it to the ISS. She finds its escape pod incapable of landing, though she can use it to fly to another vessel. Stone, a scientist with little flight experience, must continue on to a Chinese space station and use its escape pod to reach the earth.

Alongside the suspense generated through its characters' harrowing predicament, *Gravity* concentrates on Stone's psychological journey. At first she goes about her work listlessly, and she becomes terrified when set adrift in space. As she and Kowalski travel to the space shuttle, she confesses that she has been devastated by the death of her daughter. On earth she has spent her evenings driving around aimlessly, and in her grief the silence of space calms her. At the climax in the Chinese station, when her situation seems hopeless, she is about to accept a passive death. In a vision Kowalski returns and gives her a new will to live.

The filmmakers use traditional strategies to make us empathize with Stone. The narration is highly restrictive, since our knowledge is almost entirely limited to hers. For instance, we never see a cutaway to the Houston space agency. We hear only a man's voice conversing with Stone and Kowalski through their helmet radios. Similarly, we stay with her rather than her rescuer, Kowalski, when she is hurled off into the void. Sometimes the camera takes her optical POV, as when she floats weightlessly through the Chinese space station.

What, then, does digital technology add to traditional technique? For one thing, greater realism. The filmmakers sought to make *Gravity* look and sound as if it had actually been made 600 kilometers above the earth. The biggest challenge was representing weightlessness.

The filmmakers found that suspending the actors by wires that would be digitally erased didn't look authentic (though wire-work was used in some scenes within the ISS). Director Alfonso Cuarón decided to create most of the mise-en-scene with CGI. Cameras photographed actors' faces, the interiors of escape pods, and the final scene on earth, but the costumes and most settings were digitally constructed. The visors were given dust, scratches, fingerprints, and mist forming on the interior as the characters breathe (8.51). Props were made and scanned to be added to the images through animation.

The cinematography used new tools to convey the effect of weightlessness. When Kowalski and Stone are in danger or bouncing along the exterior of a space station, they are often swinging and spinning. The actors could not move so freely in a set, so they were placed in a "tilt rig," a conical basket that rotated. A camera was mounted on a flexible crane run by computer. The crane could circle the actors from all sides to create the effect of them spinning freely.

As often happens, one artistic choice triggers further choices. Once the characters were spinning and drifting, what to do about lighting? The light coming from the sun and reflected from the earth had to constantly change on the faces and bodies. Conventional film lamps could not move around the actors fast enough, and adding the light via digital animation would have been very time consuming. Moreover, in most films with digital special effects, the lighting added via computer to the effects elements seldom matches the lighting on the live-action parts of the shot. The result is a vague sense in the viewer that the image is not quite real.

Cinematographer Emmanuel Lubezki, inspired by the programmable walls of LED lights used at rock concerts, created a large Light Box within which the actors performed. The LED walls of the box projected onto the actors' faces the animated images of sun, earth, stars, and the spaceships that would eventually be added to the scene digitally. Even when the characters were tumbling in space, the light and colors changed in synchronization with the Light Box images. The effects and the live-action footage could be joined with no disparity that would mar the realism of the scene.

Apart from heightened realism, the filmmakers sought to extend our attachment to Stone through greater illusions of immersion. The staging of shots, putting us close to the characters or between them, enhances this sense. But the major factor in creating immersion was the decision to shoot in 3D, which expands the usual staging options. Actors glide toward the camera or reach out to retrieve a tool drifting toward us. Inside the space vehicles, chess pieces and Post-Its float freely. The sense of being



A CLOSER LOOK

Continued

absorbed in the film's visual world became even stronger for those viewers who saw the film in the vast Imax format.

Weightlessness and immersion work together in the film's camerawork and editing. The film has only 206 shots total, while most modern Hollywood films have 1,800 or more. As a result, there are many long takes—most dramatically, the opening shot, which runs 13 minutes. Cuarón points out that NASA video shots have shown people what the earth really looks like from space and have set up a new visual convention: "When you see all those documentaries of space exploration, they are one single shot." NASA cooperated extensively in providing images and information to the filmmakers.

Sometimes the long takes keep us oriented in relation to the characters, often with the camera hovering around or between them. Even so, there is some disorientation, as the astronauts are seen upside down or sideways (8.52). During this scene, the tether provides an axis of action, but most of the time the axis changes too rapidly to provide orientation. At other moments, the rotating framing denies us a sense of ground underneath us. One shot of Stone flung far away from the shuttle shows the earth whizzing repeatedly through the background (8.51). Again the effect is immersion, as we feel that the earth is spinning around us as well. With the characters gliding in all directions and the camera at times gyrating on its own, the long take serves as our best guide to the action. Conventional analytical editing could have been very confusing. There is only one passage of conventional shot/reverse shot, when Stone tries to convince Kowalski not to unhook himself from her and drift away to his death.

As you'd expect, the sound track is designed to intensify realism and the immersive effect. The film's opening title explains that above the earth's atmosphere, "There is nothing to carry sound." Accordingly, the filmmakers avoid all voices and effects in exteriors. Some scenes are dead silent, as at the very beginning, when the camera drifts above the earth and the shuttle has not yet

appeared. To compensate for lack of noises, the filmmakers created a musical score that includes noises similar to sound effects. Scenes of destruction or threat in the vacuum of space are accompanied by music evoking grinding metal or squealing radio distortion. The viewer may get the impression of hearing debris hitting the ISS, but that barrage is part of the nondiegetic sound track.

The sound track also reinforces our attachment to the characters. Apart from hearing their radio communication, we hear distorted vibrations coming through their suits from the things they seize and bump against. When Stone struggles to activate her experimental equipment, the rasps of bolts and sliding metal are muffled, as though they were recorded under water.

At moments, when the audience is as spatially disoriented as the characters, *Gravity* recalls experimental films like *Leviathan* (p. 198). As we've seen, though, the development of a film's plot may be accompanied by a changing stylistic pattern. As Stone settles into one space vehicle after another, more conventional creative choices gradually appear. Often the camera pans between her and a control board, with stable framing providing us a firm orientation. The long take is now used to present her hallucination of Kowalski returning to guide her, and this near-miracle reminds us that from the start he has been associated with the angel of his favorite country and western song. Motifs of spirituality in each ship's setting (a Christian icon in the Russian space station, a Buddha figurine in the Chinese vessel) suggest that Stone's decision to risk everything for survival could release her from despair over her daughter's death. When Stone joyfully manages to launch the Chinese escape pod earthward, we get rapid cutting, camerawork more jittery than before, and a traditional orchestral score dramatizing the danger and exhilaration of her fiery descent. While providing its audience a suspenseful and emotional adventure, *Gravity* shows how digital tools can extend and even transform techniques familiar from the age of film.



8.51 Digital decoration. A digital space suit and visor were added to Sandra Bullock's face. The fogging effect of her breath condensing in the helmet and the earth repeatedly spinning past behind her were also digital creations. The washed-out illumination on the astronauts' white suits simulates sunlight in an airless environment.



8.52 Digital disorientation. Many shots present no cues for directions of up and down, as when Kowalski and Stone, tethered together, move slowly above the earth's surface toward the International Space Station.

SUMMARY

This concludes our introduction of the basic cinematic techniques. In this chapter we've suggested ways to analyze stylistic functions in the overall form of individual films. We offer additional examples of analysis in Part Five.

Before that, however, there's one more factor that filmmakers take into account as a way of shaping our

experience. Nearly every film we see belongs to a larger category of films. Filmmakers declare their plans to make a thriller or a musical or an experimental film. An audience member may decide to watch a horror film or a documentary. These groupings play a central role in film-making and film viewing. In Part Four we offer you some ways to think about them.

PART

4

We launched our study of film as art by asking how the films we see are shaped by filmmakers' creative decisions and how these decisions affect production, distribution, and exhibition (Chapter 1). Then we considered how those decisions affect a film's overall form, particularly narrative form (Chapters 2–3). We went on to examine how the techniques of the film medium—mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound—give the filmmaker a wide range of artistic choices (Chapters 4–8). In the next two chapters, we consider how filmmakers and audiences share certain expectations about the kinds of films that can be made and seen.

In online video services like Netflix, films are filed under different headings—by star, by period (“Silent Movies”), occasionally by director (Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen), by place of origin (“Foreign Films”). To understand how films work and how we experience them, we need to gain a sense of some significant ways audiences and filmmakers sort films into groups.

One popular way of grouping fiction films is by *genre*, such as action films, romantic comedies, science fiction, and so on. Critics and viewers use genre labels like these in talking about films, and filmmakers are guided by them in planning projects. In Chapter 9, we examine the idea of genre. We look briefly at four widely recognized genres: the Western, the horror film, the musical, and the sports film.

Another way we group films is based on ideas about how they were made and what effects they attempt to achieve. In Chapter 10, we discuss three major types of filmmaking: documentary, experimental, and animation.

Documentary films, as their name implies, record some aspect of the real world. They are distinguished from fiction films because we assume they're making factual claims. In effect, they're saying, “This actually happened, and what I'm telling you is true.” Another particular kind of filmmaking is termed *experimental*. Such films play with film form and conventions in ways that challenge audience expectations and provide unusual emotional and intellectual experiences. Finally, *animated* films are defined by the way they are made. Drawings, models, or other subjects are presented frame by frame to create illusory movements that never existed in front of the camera. Although we often think of animated films as being for children, we'll see that virtually any type of film can be made using animation.

Types of Films

CHAPTER

9

Film Genres

In Chapter 2 (p. 50), we offered you a choice about how to begin a film. Do you start with an abrupt plunge into action? Or do you try to draw the viewer in slowly? But we didn't say much about what kind of film you were making. If you're making a horror film like *Jurassic Park*, maybe you want an initial scare to galvanize your audience. If you're making more of a science fiction adventure like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, hints at a time-traveling mystery may work better as an opening.

At the start of Chapter 3, we speculated on how you might tell a love-and-marriage story by arranging the events in various patterns. Our purpose was to get you thinking about how the same basic story could be presented in different plots (p. 74). We reflected that starting with an impending wedding and then flashing back to the partners' initial meeting could make the viewer curious about how the people fell in love, or how the couple's first quarrels were smoothed over.

In all these cases, we were assuming that some creative choices about film form depended on the *kind* of film you were making. Take the romantic comedy we asked you to design. To fill out our plot, the two main characters have to meet for the first time. How? One convention of romantic comedy is the "Cute Meet." The characters should first encounter each other in a way that is amusing, perhaps embarrassing. In *Trouble in Paradise*, two sophisticated thieves go on a date, and at one point they realize that they've robbed each other. A man and a woman in *Love Actually* meet when they are both performing in a pornographic film.

Similarly, you need to create some obstacles to the lovers' union. One convention is sometimes called the Big Misunderstanding. In *The Wedding Singer*, the heroine tries on a wedding dress while imagining she's marrying the hero. But when he glimpses her trying it on, he assumes she's preparing to marry someone else. An extreme example is *Tootsie*, in which Michael is disguised as a woman, so that he is forced to lie to Julie about his feelings. The Big Misunderstanding can be multiplied, as it is in *Tootsie*, when men become attracted to Michael-as-Dorothy.

Another way to create an obstacle is to separate the couple physically, either by decision or accident (9.1). To pile on the obstacles to true love, we could add rivals, unreliable friends (handy for bungled messages), advice-giving confidants, or authority figures such as parents and bosses. In plotting the rest of the movie, we'd try to come up with particular scenes that touch some familiar bases (9.2).

But if the film touched every base, it could sink into stale repetition. So we might try to tweak romantic-comedy formulas. Nora Ephron's *Sleepless in Seattle* delays the Cute Meet until very late in the story. The Big Misunderstanding that divides the couple in *50 First Dates* involves amnesia, so the woman never recognizes the man from one day to the next. *Love Actually* innovates by intertwining many



9.1



9.2

9.1–9.2 Romantic comedy conventions. Accidents of timing, with lovers just missing appointments, are frequent in romantic comedies. In *Serendipity*, a fluke of timing and a mischievous kid in an elevator keep Jonathan and Sara from reuniting (9.1). *(500) Days of Summer* uses another convention, the montage sequence with a pop song conveying a lover's mood. The film innovates by treating the hero's daffy elation as contagious, leading to a dance number in a park and a touch of fantasy with the animated blue bird (9.2).

romances, some of which go nowhere. *Bridesmaids* innovates by incorporating elements of male-centered comedy into romantic plotlines centering on women.

In short, in planning our film we would remember that it falls into a *genre* and that the genre has specific conventions. If we were ambitious, we'd also be trying to come up with some original ways to handle those conventions.

Understanding Genre

The word *genre* is originally French, and it simply means "kind" or "type." It's related to another word, *genus*, which is used in the biological sciences to classify groups of plants and animals. When we speak of film genres, we're indicating certain types of movies. The science fiction film, the action picture, the comedy, the musical, the Western—these are some genres of fictional storytelling cinema.

Scientists can usually place plants or animals within a single genus with confidence, but film genres lack that sort of scientific precision. Instead, genres are convenient terms that develop informally. Filmmakers, industry decision makers, critics, and viewers all share the sense that certain films resemble one another in significant ways. Genres also change over time, as filmmakers invent new twists on old formulas. Although we have solid intuitions about what genre a film falls into, defining the precise boundaries between genres can be tricky, as we'll see.

When we think about genre, the examples that come to mind are usually those of fictional live-action films. We'll see in the next chapter that there can be genres of other basic sorts of cinema. There are genres of documentary, such as the compilation film and the concert movie. Experimental films and animated films contain genres as well.

Defining a Genre

Popular, mass-market cinema rests on genre filmmaking. Most countries have versions of romance stories, action sagas, supernatural tales, and comedies. Some genres are more local in flavor. Germany has its *Heimatfilm*, the tale of small-town life. The Hindi cinema of India has produced *devotionals*, films centering on the lives of saints and religious figures, as well as *mythologicals*, derived from legend and literary classics. Mexican filmmakers developed the *cabaretera*, a type of melodrama centering on prostitutes.

Sometimes reviewers dismiss genre films as shallow and trivial, assuming them to be simply formulaic: It's only a Western; it's just a horror film. Undoubtedly, many films in all genres are cheaply and unimaginatively made. Yet, because genres are central to most filmmaking, a genre picture can be excellent. *Singin' in the Rain* is a musical, as well as one of the best American films. *Grand Illusion* is a war film. *Psycho* is a thriller. *The Godfather* is a gangster film. On the whole, genre is a category best used to describe and analyze films, not to evaluate them.

Audiences know the genres of their culture very well—so well that genres may structure people's ways of seeing the world. Children may grow up pretending to be superheroes or fairy-tale princesses. Patton Oswalt reports that his high school friends categorized themselves along genre lines: They were Zombies (fans of Goth culture and metal rock), Spaceships (high-tech gadgets, futuristic utopias), or Wastelands (punk rock, apocalyptic fiction). Since the Internet allows everyone to learn as much as they want about anything in popular culture, everyone can be a genre connoisseur, a passionate and knowledgeable fan.

What Makes a Genre? Everyone seems reasonably agreed on what genres exist and what films fall into them, but it's not clear how we arrive at that consensus. What makes us think that dozens or hundreds of films belong to the same category?

Most scholars agree that no genre can be defined in a single hard-and-fast way. In some genres the films share subjects or themes. A gangster film centers on urban organized crime. A science fiction film features a technology beyond the reach of contemporary science. A fantasy film typically involves magical powers and supernatural creatures.

Subject matter or theme isn't so central to defining other genres. Musicals are recognizable chiefly by their manner of presentation: singing, dancing, or both. The detective film is partly defined by the plot pattern of an investigation. And some genres are defined by the distinctive emotional effect they aim for: amusement in comedies, tension in suspense films.

Even when we have a firm sense of what a particular genre is, we may find films that fit the category to different degrees. Typically, we think of a genre as consisting of clear cases and fuzzier examples. *Singin' in the Rain* is a prime example of a musical, but David Byrne's *True Stories*, with its ironic presentation of musical numbers, is more of a borderline case. And an audience's sense of the core cases can change over history. For modern audiences, a core example of the thriller would be *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, whereas for audiences of the 1950s, a prime example would have been something less gory, like Hitchcock's *North by Northwest*.

Sometimes a film seems to straddle two genres. Is *Groundhog Day* a romantic comedy or a fantasy? Is *Psycho* a slasher film or a mystery thriller? Steven Spielberg's

“I've got news for you—pop culture is nerd culture.”
—Patton Oswalt, comedian and actor

War of the Worlds combines horror, science fiction, and family melodrama. As we'll see, mixing genres is one important source of change in film history.

Subgenres You've probably noticed that some genre labels are very broad. The comedy category includes slapstick comedies such as *Animal House*, romantic comedies such as *The Proposal*, parodies such as the Austin Powers series, and raunchy male-oriented comedies such as *The Hangover*. Similarly, melodrama, as thought of today, encompasses stories of crises in marriage (*In the Bedroom*), dysfunctional families (*Magnolia*), and doomed love affairs (*The Fault in Our Stars*).

For this reason, it's useful to have the idea of *subgenres* to refer to distinct and fairly long-lasting types within a genre. There are science fiction films involving interplanetary travel (sometimes mockingly called “space opera”), alien invasions of earth, biological experiments (like *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*), or future societies, like the worlds of *Elysium* and *THX-1138*. These subgenres will have distinct conventions of their own and perhaps appeal to different viewers. Again, sometimes critics call our attention to subgenres. Reviewers have popularized terms like “dystopias” for bleak science fiction futures and “buddy films” for action movies like *21 Jump Street* that display male bonding.

The Usefulness of Genre Categories Everyone who comes into contact with cinema relies on ideas of genre. Genre concepts help producers decide what films to make. When science fiction and fantasy films are popular, executives are likelier to green-light projects in those genres. The massive success of young-adult fantasy fiction, crystallized in the Harry Potter franchise, led many studios to finance costly but unprofitable ventures into the same territory (*Inkheart*, *The Golden Compass*). During the 1960s studios backed *The Sound of Music* and other big-budget musicals because they attracted a wide audience. Such lavish projects are risky today, and many have failed, even when they were based on acclaimed Broadway shows (such as *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Rent*). Contemporary musicals tend to be lower-budget items such as *Mamma Mia!* and the *Step Up* series.

Advertising tends to pinpoint a film's genre. The poster for *Twilight: Eclipse* proclaims: “Vampires. Werewolves. Humans. It's time to choose a side.” Coming-attractions trailers and the film's poster design usually leave no doubt about what genre the film is in, the better to target fans. Critics and entertainment reporters play a role in this promotional process. To call *(500) Days of Summer* “a romantic comedy that remembers that the best romances have a touch of the bittersweet” not only announces what genre the film belongs to but also expresses an evaluation of how well it fulfills certain conventions.

For viewers, genre categories are a part of their tastes. Every moviegoer likes some genres, tolerates others, and loathes others. Fans may try to see everything in a genre they love and to learn as much as possible about their favorites. They may exchange information via magazines, websites, or conventions. Peter Jackson and Guillermo del Toro started out as passionate genre geeks, and their intimate knowledge of horror and fantasy traditions pervades the films they direct.

Analyzing a Genre

Both filmmakers and film viewers, then, share some general notions about the types of films that compete for our attention. We largely agree on the genre's conventions, the kinds of recurring elements we picked out in romantic comedies. For the filmmaker, the conventions are materials they work with. For the viewer, conventions shape our expectations about what we're likely to see and hear.

Conventions of Story and Style Genre conventions often center on plot patterns. We anticipate an investigation in a mystery film; revenge plotlines are common in Westerns; a musical finds ways to provide song-and-dance situations.

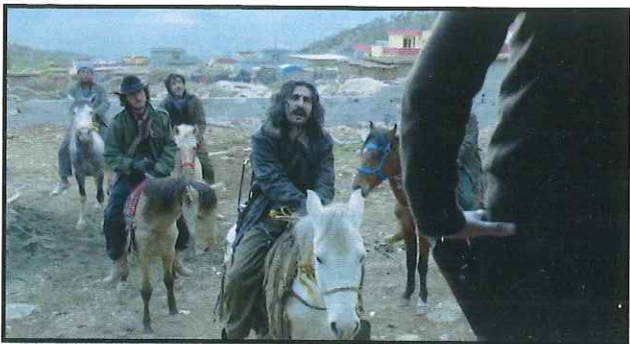


9.3



9.4

9.3–9.4 Genre-specific techniques. An aggressive depth composition would usually be out of place in a musical or romantic comedy, but it suits the tension developing in a police interrogation in *The Secret in Their Eyes* (9.3). In *The Exorcist*, a single streetlight picks out the priest as he arrives at night, while light streams from the room where the possessed girl is confined (9.4).



9.5 Hollywood conventions elsewhere. Hineer Saleem's *My Sweet Pepper Land* shows a Kurdish lawman trying to bring peace to a war-torn border town. The film draws on classic Western iconography—threatening outlaws on horses, the hero poised to draw his pistol—to depict a showdown.

The gangster film usually centers on the gangster's rise and fall as he struggles against police and rival gangs. We expect a biographical film ("biopic") such as *Lincoln* or *The Theory of Everything* to trace significant episodes in an actual person's life. In a cop thriller, certain characters are conventional: the shifty informer, the comic sidekick, the exasperated captain who despairs of getting the squad to follow procedure.

Other genre conventions are more thematic, involving broad meanings that are summoned again and again. The Hong Kong martial-arts film commonly celebrates loyalty and obedience to one's teacher. A standard theme of the gangster film has been the price of criminal success, with the gangster's rise to power portrayed as a hardening into egotism and brutality. The screwball comedy traditionally sets up a thematic opposition between a stiff, snobbish social milieu and characters' urges for freedom and innocent zaniness. A melodrama such as *One Day* suggests the cost of failing to recognize your true love.

Still other genre conventions involve stylistic patterns. Techniques that would be jarring in one genre may become common in another (9.3). Low-key and high-contrast lighting is rare in a musical or romantic comedy but it's standard in the horror film and the thriller (9.4). In an action picture, we expect rapid cutting and slow-motion violence. In the melodrama, an emotional twist may be underscored by a sudden burst of poignant music. That sort of music would be out of place in a horror film, which might instead offer us a grating burst of sound effects.

Genre Iconography As a visual medium, cinema can also define genres through conventional *iconography*. A genre's iconography consists of recurring symbolic images that carry meaning from film to film.

Objects and settings often furnish iconography for a genre. A close-up of a tommy gun lifted out of a 1920s Ford would probably be enough to identify a scene as being from a gangster movie, while a shot of a long, curved sword hanging from a kimono would place us in the world of the samurai. The war film takes place in battle-scarred landscapes, the backstage musical in theaters and clubs, the space-travel film in starships and on distant planets.

Film industries outside America can draw on Hollywood iconography (9.5). Certain film stars can become iconographic as well—Judy Garland and Barbra Streisand for the musical, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood for the Western, Arnold Schwarzenegger for the action picture, Steve Carell and Seth Rogen for comedy, Amy Adams and Sandra Bullock for romantic drama and comedy.

By knowing conventions, viewers have a clear pathway into the film. Our expectations are set, and the film can communicate information economically. When we meet the weak sheriff, we strongly suspect that he will not stand up to the outlaw gang. We can then focus attention on the cowboy hero as he is slowly drawn into helping the townspeople defend themselves.

Audiences expect the genre film to offer something familiar, but they demand something new as well. So a film can revise or even reject the conventions associated with its genre. *Bugsy Malone* is a gangster musical in which children play all

the traditional adult roles. *2001: A Space Odyssey* violated several conventions of the science fiction genre: beginning with a lengthy sequence set in prehistoric times, synchronizing classical music to outer-space action, and ending with an enigmatically symbolic fetus drifting through space. Some reviewers objected to the Tesla machine in *The Prestige*, claiming that it violated the conventions of a historical mystery film. But what one critic called "a sudden, desperate leap into fantasy" can be seen as an effort to update traditional backstage conflicts for an audience fascinated by fantasy and science fiction.

By blending or varying or even rejecting genre conventions, filmmakers force viewers to reset their expectations and engage with the film in fresh ways. (See "Creative Decisions in a Contemporary Genre.") The interplay of convention and innovation, familiarity and novelty, is central to the genre film.

Genre History

Because filmmakers frequently play with conventions, genres change constantly. A comedy from the 1920s is likely to be very different from one in the 1960s. Across history, the conventions of genres and subgenres get recast, and by mixing conventions from different genres, filmmakers create new possibilities surprisingly often.

Origins Many film genres begin by borrowing conventions from other media. The melodrama has clear antecedents in stage plays and novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Types of comedy can be traced back to stage farces or comic novels. Musicals draw on both musical comedies and variety shows.

Yet the film medium always reshapes an adopted genre. For example, Western novels were already popular in the 19th century when cinema was invented. Yet Westerns did not become a film genre until after 1908. Why the delay? Westerns need outdoor landscapes. As films got longer (up to roughly 15 minutes) and studios hired actors on contract, filmmakers may have been encouraged to shoot more on location. Using rural American landscapes in turn fostered stories involving the frontier, and the Western quickly became a tremendously popular genre. It was also a uniquely American genre, giving U.S. films a way to compete in the growing international market. In such ways film genres acquire their own history, combining borrowings from other arts and distinctive innovations.

One important pressure on genres is technology. The musical film crystallized with the arrival of synchronized sound. Fantasy and science fiction became popular partly because filmmakers had digital tools that could conjure up unreal creatures and imaginary landscapes. Digital special effects have also enabled filmmakers to build photorealistic worlds for comic-book superheroes (1.33, 1.34).

Genres and Cycles Once a genre and its subgenres are launched, there seems to be no predictable trajectory. We might expect that the earliest films in the genre are the purest instances, with genre mixing coming at a late stage. But genre mixing can take place very soon. *Whoopie!* (1930), a musical from the beginning of talking pictures, is also a Western. *Just Imagine* (1930), one of the first sound science fiction films, contains a comic song. Some historians have also speculated that a genre inevitably passes from a phase of maturity to one of parody, when it begins to mock its own conventions. Yet an early Western, *The Great K & A Train Robbery* (1926), is an all-out parody of its own genre. Early slapstick comedies often take moviemaking as their subject and ruthlessly poke fun at comic conventions, as in Charlie Chaplin's farcical *His New Job* (1915).

Over history, genres rise and fall in prestige and popularity. The result is the phenomenon known as *cycles*. A cycle is a batch of related genre films that enjoys intense popularity and influence over a fairly brief period.

“Fixed forms can yield infinite, ingenious variations.”

—Joyce Carol Oates, novelist



A CLOSER LOOK

Creative Decisions in a Contemporary Genre *The Crime Thriller as Subgenre*

The thriller, like the comedy, is a very broad category, with many subgenres. There are supernatural thrillers (*The Sixth Sense*), political thrillers (*Munich*), and spy thrillers (*The Bourne Ultimatum*). Many others revolve around crime—planned, committed, or thwarted.

Using few special effects and set in contemporary urban locations, crime thrillers can be comparatively cheap to produce. They offer showy roles to actors, and they allow writers and directors to display their ingenuity in playing with the audience's expectations. Although the genre has fuzzy edges, we can chart some core cases by considering the ways in which filmmakers have exploited narrative conventions of the genre.

Four Character Roles A crime is at the center of the thriller plot, and usually four sorts of characters are involved. There are the victims, the more or less innocent bystanders, the forces of justice, and the lawbreakers. Typically, the filmmaker decides to organize the film's narration around one or two of these character roles.

In *Double Jeopardy*, a husband disappears and his wife is found guilty of his murder. In prison, she discovers that he is alive and hiding out with his mistress. Released on parole, she sets out to find her son, but she is pursued by her hard-bitten parole officer. Suspense arises from the double chase and the cat-and-mouse game played by the desperate husband and his embittered "widow," who can now murder him with impunity. The plot action and narration are organized around the victimized wife. Her vengeful pursuit propels the action forward, and the narration favors her, restricting us largely to what she believes and eventually learns.

Double Jeopardy concentrates on an innocent person who is the target of the crime, and this is one common pattern in the person-in-peril subgenre. At some point, the victim usually realizes that he or she cannot react passively and must fight back, as in *Duel*, *The Fugitive*, *Breakdown*, and *Panic Room* (9.6). In *Ransom*, the father of a kidnapped boy refuses to pay the ransom, offering it as a bounty on the gang holding his son.

Alternatively, the filmmaker can center the plot on an innocent bystander dropped into a struggle between the criminal, the victims, and the forces of justice. In *Die Hard*, an off-duty detective is accidentally trapped in a hostage crisis, so he must fight both police and thieves to rescue the hostages. *The Ghost Writer* thrusts a freelance biographer into a murderous political conspiracy. In *Cellular*, through an accidental phone call, a beach idler must locate a woman who's been kidnapped.

Thematically, this innocent-bystander plot pattern often emphasizes characters discovering resources within

themselves—courage, cleverness, even a capacity for violence. *Collateral* centers on a taxi driver forced to chauffeur a paid killer from target to target. In the course of the night, Max must abandon his fantasy of a desert island and face the sordid reality of the city he lives in (p. 5).

Instead of spotlighting the victim or an innocent bystander, the filmmaker may build the plot around the forces of justice. The action then typically becomes an investigation, in which police or private detectives seek to capture the criminal or prevent a crime. A classic example is *The Big Heat*, in which a rogue cop seeks to avenge the death of his wife by capturing the mobsters responsible. *The Bodyguard*, *In the Line of Fire*, and *Non-Stop* present protagonists seeking to forestall a threatened murder. The contemporary serial-killer plot tends to emphasize police pursuit, offering only glimpses of the criminal. *Se7en* follows two policemen in their efforts to untangle a string of murders emblematic of the seven deadly sins. When a plot highlights the investigators, themes of the fallibility of justice tend to come to the fore. In *L.A. Confidential*, three ill-matched detectives join forces to reveal how official corruption has led to the murders of prostitutes.

Alternatively, the plot of a crime thriller can put the criminal center stage. Perhaps the protagonist is a mild-mannered murderer, as in *The Suspect*, or a paid killer, as in Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samourai*. Another variant is the heist or caper film, showcasing a tightly orchestrated robbery. This subgenre became a mainstay in the 1950s, with *The Asphalt Jungle*, *Bob Le Flambeur*, and *Rififi*, and it made a comeback in recent years with the *Ocean's Eleven* series. There is also the avenging outlaw, as in *Payback* and *Drive*, but there's also the dishonor-among-thieves variant, in which criminals betray one another. *A Simple Plan* portrays nervous amateur thieves, whereas *Jackie Brown* traces an expanding web of double-crosses.

Sometimes the filmmaker will devote equal time to the police and the criminal, a strategy which can build up thematic parallels. In John Woo's *The Killer*, a hit man tries to quit the business, aided by his weak mentor. At the same time, we follow the investigation conducted by a police detective, who's also under the sway of an older colleague. Michael Mann's *Heat* creates strong parallels between cop and robber, each having problems with the women in their lives. In both *The Killer* and *Heat*, the opposing characters recognize their kinship. In contrast, *Fargo* plays on the sharp differences between the sunny common sense of the policewoman and an almost pitifully blundering kidnapper.

Narration's Effects Thrillers obviously aim to thrill us—that is, to startle, shock, and maintain suspense. How do we distinguish them from horror films, which

seek similar effects? Horror aims to disgust as well. The central character of a horror film is a monster that is both fearsome and repellent. By contrast, a thriller need not involve disgust. The villain may be quite attractive (the suave men in *Red Eye* and *Primal Fear*, the enticing women in *Red Rock West* and *Gone Girl*). While suspense and surprise are important in all cinematic storytelling, these responses dominate the crime thriller. The plots highlight clever plans, still more clever blocking moves, and sudden coincidences that upset carefully timed schemes. Tracing out a plan or following an investigation can yield suspense (Will the criminal succeed? How?), while unexpected twists trigger surprise, forcing us to reconsider the odds of the criminal's success.

More specifically, the thriller's effects depend on which characters are highlighted by the plot and narration. If the protagonist is a victim or a bystander, the suspense we feel comes from the likelihood that he or she will be harmed. If the hero is a figure of justice, we become concerned that she or he will not be able to protect the innocents. When the investigator doesn't have the police force as backup, anxiety can intensify: the unauthorized detectives of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* must fight on their own.

When the narration centers on the criminal, how can the filmmaker arouse the viewer's sympathy for him or her? One way is to rank the lawbreakers on a scale of immorality. The most sympathetic criminals will be ones who are trying to give up their crime career (*The Killer*) or ones who oppose even more immoral figures. The heroes of *Out of Sight* are easy-going, good-humored thieves ripping off a white-collar embezzler and a band of crazed killers. Sometimes criminal protagonists can stretch our sympathies in challenging directions to frighten. We might admire the bravado of the *Ocean's Eleven* gang, but we aren't so comfortable with the ingratiating psychopath of *The Talented Mr. Ripley*. In *A Simple Plan*, basically good people turn crooked after a momentary weakness. Even though they have done wrong, we may find ourselves hoping that they succeed in their crime. As Dostoevsky showed in *Crime and Punishment*, a crime tale can make us think about what forces drive people to murder (9.7).

Innovations in the Thriller Like any genre or subgenre, the crime thriller can mix with others. It blends with the horror film in *From Dusk Till Dawn* and with



9.6



9.7

9.6, 9.7 Crime thriller: Victims and victimizer. Innocents in jeopardy: an unusual camera position for a classic thriller situation in *Panic Room* (9.6). In *A History of Violence*, Tom Stall, quiet owner of a small-town diner, is revealed to have a killer's instincts (9.7).



A CLOSER LOOK

Continued

science fiction in *Blade Runner* and *Minority Report*. *Rush Hour* and *The Other Guys* push the police investigation toward farce, while *Lock, Stock, and Two Smoking Barrels* piles up absurd coincidences around a quartet of petty crooks who steal ganja and money from a cutthroat gang.

The thriller's emphasis on suspense and surprise encourages the filmmaker to mislead the audience, and this invites experiments with narrative form. Hitchcock pioneered this tendency by suddenly switching protagonists in *Psycho* and by letting two couples' lives intertwine in *Family Plot*. Many films whose plots play with story time (see pp. 82–84) are crime thrillers. A crime in the story may be replayed in the plot, showing different clues each time (*Snake Eyes*) or presenting different points of view (*The Killing*, *Jackie Brown*; see pp. 287–290). *Memento* tells its investigation story in reverse order. *The Usual Suspects* creates an unreliable flashback narration, at the end turning a minor character into a major player. *Bound* consists largely of flashbacks launched from a cryptic present-time situation—a woman tied and gagged in a closet. As the crime story is revealed, we have reason to suspect that at some phase the robbery scheme she and her partner have devised will fail.

Independent filmmakers have found that audiences will accept storytelling experiments when packaged in a crime thriller. For other independents, the subgenre offers a structure on which they can hang their personal concerns. David Mamet's interest in how people conceal

their true motives surfaces in *House of Games* and *The Spanish Prisoner*. Joel and Ethan Coen set *Blood Simple* and *The Man Who Wasn't There* in bleak, small-town locales populated with losers lusting for one big chance. David Lynch uses the conventions of suspense and surprise to summon up a dread-filled atmosphere that may never receive rational explanation. In *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Drive*, the crimes are ominous but obscure, the criminals nightmarish grotesques, and the innocents not wholly innocent.

Because crime thrillers can be shot fairly cheaply, the subgenre has offered Hollywood's rivals a path to international distribution. Hong Kong has exported many such items, notably *Infernal Affairs* (the source for *The Departed*) and more experimental entries such as *The Mission* and *PTU*. Comparable films have come from France (*La Femme Nikita*, *Polisse*), Germany (*Dreileben*), Britain (*Snatch*, *Sexy Beast*), Spain (*Live Flesh*), Japan (*Sonatine*), Argentina (*The Secret in Their Eyes*), Korea (*Nowhere to Hide*, *Chaser*), and Thailand (*Bangkok Dangerous*). Audiences worldwide share similar expectations about thrillers, and filmmakers can innovate by injecting local cultural traditions into the narrative and thematic conventions. Two of our sample analyses, of *Breathless* (pp. 418–422) and of *Chungking Express* (pp. 428–432), focus on non-Hollywood films that imaginatively shift the expectations we bring to the crime thriller.

Cycles typically occur when a successful film triggers a burst of imitations. *The Godfather* unleashed a brief spate of gangster movies. During the 1970s, there was a cycle of disaster movies (*Earthquake*, *The Poseidon Adventure*). A cycle of fantasy adventures including the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the *Harry Potter* series, and the *Chronicles of Narnia* franchise, emerged in the early 2000s. Later there developed a cycle of romantic vampire films spearheaded by *Twilight* (2008), then another cycle of dystopian fantasies like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*.

Often what seems a short-term cycle has persisted so long that it becomes a well-entrenched subgenre. Few observers would have predicted that the horror cycle that emerged with *Halloween* and *A Nightmare on Elm Street* would have lasted past the 1980s, but it earned the label of “slasher film” and was frequently revived, notably in the *Scream* series. Action movies centering on comic-book superheroes formed a small cycle in the 1980s but became a flourishing subgenre in the 2000s with *Batman Begins*, *Spider-Man*, *Iron Man*, the *X-Men* series, and many other entries.

Because cycles and subgenres can emerge at any time, we should expect that no genre ever really dies. A genre may pass out of fashion for a time, only to return in updated garb. The sword-and-sandal epic set in ancient times was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. It virtually disappeared until Ridley Scott revived it to considerable acclaim in 2000 with *Gladiator*, inspiring a cycle that included *Troy*, *Alexander*, and *300*.

Genre Mixing A genre may also change by mixing its conventions with those of another genre. In 1979, *Alien* proved innovative because it fused science fiction conventions with those of the contemporary horror film, centering on a monster stalking its victims one by one. The rusting spaceship became the futuristic equivalent of the old dark house full of unseen dangers. By the 2000s, the science fiction/horror blend had become conventional, as in *Pitch Black* and *Doom*.

The musical blends easily with other genres. There have been musical melodramas, such as *Yentl* and two versions of *A Star Is Born*. *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* created the musical horror movie. During the 1930s and 1940s, singing cowboys such as Gene Autry were popular, and the Western musical was revived in the 1960s with *Cat Ballou*. Likewise, comedy can merge with any other genre. Mel Brooks and Woody Allen have created comedies out of the conventions of science fiction (*Spaceballs*, *Sleeper*), Westerns (*Blazing Saddles*), outlaw films (*Take the Money and Run*), thrillers and detective stories (*High Anxiety*, *Manhattan Murder Mystery*), even historical epics (*History of the World Part I*, *Love and Death*). Comic touches can lighten dramas, and if the proportions are somewhat equal, we have what some call a “dramedy” or a “seriocomedy” (9.8). The combinations seem almost limitless. In *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, bumbling escaped prisoners accidentally become country singing stars, and the result is at once an outlaw movie, a social protest film, a slapstick comedy, and a musical.

Filmmakers understand that mixing genres is a good way to innovate. The romantic comedy is typically associated with female audiences, but in the late 2000s some producers believed that adding some elements of raunchy comedy would attract men. The result was such films as *The Wedding Crashers* and *Knocked Up*. According to one producer: “Fundamentally, they’re romantic comedies, but the concepts are very male-appropriate.” *Guardians of the Galaxy* found success by treating save-the-universe space opera as a comic premise.

Filmmakers may borrow from other cultures too. The Japanese swordplay film, based on virtuoso combat and themes of honor and revenge, has blended well with the Western. Sergio Leone based his Italian Western *For a Fistful of Dollars* loosely on the plot of Akira Kurosawa's *Yojimbo*, and the same Japanese director's *Seven Samurai* provided the basis for the Hollywood Western *The Magnificent Seven*. Similarly, widespread fan interest in Hong Kong movies during the 1980s and 1990s led the Wachowski brothers to mix high-tech science fiction effects with martial-arts choreography in *The Matrix*.

The fact that genres can intermingle doesn't mean that there are no distinctions among them. *The Matrix* is a hybrid, but we can still differentiate standard Hong Kong martial-arts films from standard Hollywood science fiction tales. Although we can't pin down a single description of a genre that will apply for all time, we can recognize that at any moment in film history, filmmakers, critics, and audiences agree closely on the genres in play. Again, there are usually core examples, ones that makers and viewers agree are clear-cut instances, as well as more peripheral or mixed cases.

The Social Functions of Genres

The fact that every genre has fluctuated in popularity reminds us that genres are tightly bound to cultural factors. Why do audiences enjoy seeing the same conventions over and over?



9.8 Drama plus comedy. The serious drama at the core of *Barbershop*—whether a son should sustain his father's business for the good of the community—is lightened by sight gags, inventive insults, and scabrous monologues, like Eddie's rants about Rosa Parks and other African-American icons.

“So it's kind of a psychic political thriller comedy with a heart.” “With a heart. And not unlike *Ghost* meets *Manchurian Candidate*.”

—Producer and screenwriter in the opening scene of Robert Altman's *The Player*

Rituals and Ambivalence Many film scholars believe that genres are ritualized dramas resembling holiday celebrations—ceremonies that are satisfying because they reaffirm cultural values in a predictable way. At the end of *Saving Private Ryan* or *You've Got Mail*, who can resist a surge of reassuring satisfaction that cherished values—self-sacrificing heroism, the desirability of romantic love—have been validated? And just as one can see these ceremonies as helping us forget the more disturbing aspects of the world, the familiar characters and plots of genres may also serve to distract the audience from real social problems.

Some scholars would argue that genres go further and actually exploit ambivalent social values and attitudes. The gangster film, for instance, makes it possible for audiences to relish the mobster's swagger while still feeling satisfied when he receives his punishment. Seen from this standpoint, genre conventions arouse emotion by touching on deep social uncertainties but then channel those emotions into approved attitudes.

Because genre films promise something new based on something familiar, they may also respond quickly to broad social trends. During the economic depression of the 1930s, for instance, the Warner Bros. musical films introduced social commentary into stage numbers. In *Gold Diggers of 1933*, a singer asks the Depression-era audience to remember “my forgotten man,” the unemployed war veteran. More recently, Hollywood producers have tried to suit romantic comedies to the tastes of career women with the *Sex and the City* films and Sandra Bullock vehicles such as *The Proposal* and *Two Weeks Notice*. In Chapter 11, we consider how another musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, seems tailored to the home-front audience of World War II.

Genres as Social Reflection It's one thing to suggest that filmmakers deliberately address their films to current concerns or tastes. But some scholars suggest that at different points in history, the stories, themes, values, or imagery of the genre harmonize with public attitudes in a more involuntary fashion. For instance, don't the science fiction films of the 1950s, with hydrogen bombs creating Godzilla and other monsters, reveal fears of nuclear technology run amok? Even if the filmmakers didn't knowingly put such messages in their work, perhaps the success of the films reflected what the audiences felt. The hypothesis is that genre conventions, repeated from film to film, reflected the audience's pervasive doubts or anxieties. Many film scholars would argue that this approach helps explain why genres vary in popularity. As the public anxieties change, new genres will reflect more up-to-date concerns.

Social processes can be reflected in genre innovations as well. Ripley, the female protagonist of *Aliens*, is a courageous, even aggressive, warrior who also has a warm, maternal side (9.9, 9.10). This was something of a novelty in the science fiction genre. Many commentators saw Ripley as a product of attitudes derived from the women's movement of the 1970s. Feminist groups argued that women could be seen as active and competent without losing positive qualities associated with feminine behavior, such as gentleness and sympathy. As these ideas spread through mainstream media and social opinion, films such as *Aliens* could turn traditionally masculine roles over to female characters. Perhaps the filmmakers didn't intend to send this message, but the attitudes in the films could be seen as harmonizing with new conceptions of gender roles.

Such ways of looking at genre are usually called *reflectionist*, because they assume that genres reflect social attitudes, as if in a mirror. Some critics would object that reflectionist readings can become oversimplified. If we look closely at a genre film, we usually discover complexities that nuance a reflectionist account. For instance, if we look beyond Ripley, the protagonist of *Aliens*, we find that all the characters lie along a continuum running between “masculine” and “feminine” values, and the survivors of the adventure, male or female, seem to blend the best of



9.9



9.10

9.9–9.10 Genre and gender roles: Warrior and mother. In *Aliens*, Ripley learns how to use a weapon (9.9), but she can also comfort the orphaned girl the soldiers find (9.10).

both gender identities. Moreover, often what seems to be social reflection is simply the film industry's effort to exploit the day's headlines. A genre film may reflect not the audience's hopes and fears but the filmmakers' guess about what might sell.

Four Genres

Whether we study a genre's history, its cultural functions, or its representations of social trends, conventions remain our best point of departure. To illustrate how we might analyze conventions and their change across history, we look at four significant genres of American filmmaking.

The Western

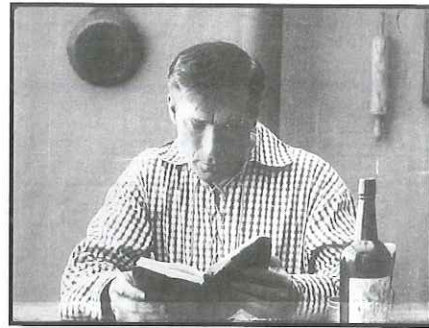
The Western is one of the earliest film genres, having become established in the 1910s. It is partly based on historical reality, since in the American West there were cowboys, outlaws, settlers, and tribes of Native Americans. Films also derived their portrayal of the frontier from songs, popular fiction, and Wild West shows. Early actors sometimes mirrored this blend of realism and myth: Cowboy star Tom Mix had been a Texas Ranger, a Wild West performer, and a champion rodeo rider.

Quite early, the central theme of the genre became the conflict between civilized order and the lawless frontier. From the East and the city come the settlers who want to raise families, the schoolteachers who aim to spread learning, and the bankers and government officials. In the vast natural spaces, by contrast, people outside Eastern civilization thrive—not only the Native Americans but also outlaws, trappers and traders, and greedy cattle barons.

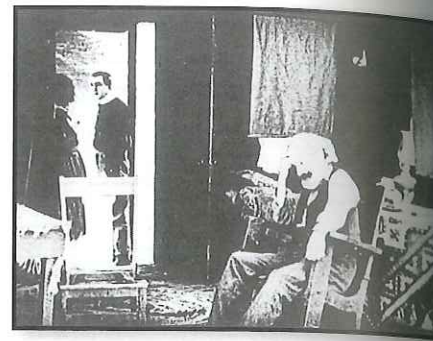
Iconography reinforces this basic duality. The covered wagon and the railroad are set against the horse and canoe; the schoolhouse and church contrast with the lonely campfire in the hills. As in most genres, costume is iconographically significant too. The settlers' starched dresses and Sunday suits stand out against American Indians' tribal garb and the cowboys' jeans and Stetsons.

Interestingly, the typical Western hero stands between the two thematic poles. At home in the wilderness but naturally inclined toward justice and kindness, the cowboy is often poised between savagery and civilization. William S. Hart, one of the most popular early Western stars, crystallized the character of the “good bad man” as a common protagonist. In *Hell's Hinges* (1916), a minister's sister tries to reform him; one shot represents the pull between two ways of life (9.11).

9.11–9.12 Hero in between. The “good bad” hero of *Hell’s Hinges* reads the Bible, a bottle of whiskey at his elbow (9.11). In *Straight Shooting*, the hero stands framed in the farmhouse doorway, halfway between the lure of civilization and the call of the wilderness (9.12).



9.11



9.12

The in-between position of the hero affects common Western plots. The protagonist may start out on the side of the lawless, or he may simply stand apart from the conflict. In either case, he becomes uneasily attracted to the life offered by the newcomers to the frontier. Eventually, the hero decides to join the forces of order, helping them fight hired gunmen, bandits, or whatever the film presents as a threat to stability and progress.

As the genre developed, a social ideology governed its conventions. White populations’ progress westward was considered a historic mission, while the conquered indigenous cultures were usually treated as primitive and savage. Western films are full of racist stereotypes of Native Americans and Hispanics. On a few occasions, filmmakers treated Native American characters as tragic figures, ennobled by their closeness to nature but facing the extinction of their way of life. The best early example is probably *The Last of the Mohicans* (1920).

Nor was the genre always optimistic about taming the wilderness. The hero’s eventual commitment to civilization’s values was often tinged with regret for his loss of freedom. In John Ford’s *Straight Shooting* (1917), Cheyenne Harry (played by Harry Carey) is hired by a villainous rancher to evict a farmer, but he falls in love with the farmer’s daughter and vows to reform. Rallying the farmers, Harry helps defeat the rancher. Still, he is reluctant to settle down with Molly (9.12).

Within this set of values, a great many conventional scenes became standardized—the Indians’ attack on forts or wagon trains, the shy courting of a woman by the rough-hewn hero, the hero’s discovery of a burned settler’s shack, the outlaws’ robbery of a bank or stagecoach, the climactic gunfight on dusty town streets. Writers and directors could distinguish their films by novel handlings of these elements. In Sergio Leone’s flamboyant Italian Westerns, conventions are stretched out in minute detail and amplified to a huge scale (9.13).



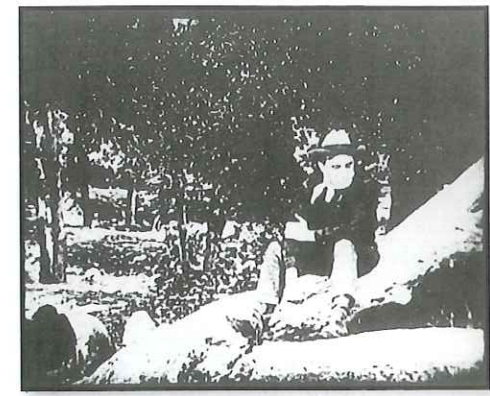
9.13 Showdown in an arena. The three-way shootout at the climax of *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (1966) is filmed to resemble a bullfight.

“I knew Wyatt Earp. In the very early silent days, a couple of times a year he would come up to visit pals, cowboys he knew in Tombstone; a lot of them were in my company. I think I was an assistant prop boy then and I used to give him a chair and a cup of coffee, and he told me about the fight at the O.K. Corral. So in *My Darling Clementine*, we did it exactly the way it had been. They didn’t just walk up the street and start banging away at each other; it was a clever military manoeuvre.”

—John Ford, director, *Stagecoach*



9.14



9.15

9.14–9.15 The solitary hero. During the closing shot of *The Searchers* (9.14), John Wayne repeats Harry Carey’s characteristic gripping of his forearm in *Straight Shooting* (9.15).

There were narrative and thematic innovations as well. After such liberal Westerns of the 1950s as *Broken Arrow* (1950), indigenous cultures began to be treated with more respect. In *Little Big Man* (1970) and *Soldier Blue* (1970), the conventional thematic values were reversed, depicting Indian life as civilized and white society as marauding. Some films played up the hero’s uncivilized side, showing him perilously out of control (*Winchester 73*, 1950), or even psychopathic (*The Left-Handed Gun*, 1958). The heroes of *The Wild Bunch* (1969) would have been considered unvarnished villains in early Westerns.

The new complexity of the protagonist is evident in John Ford’s *The Searchers* (1956). After a Comanche raid on his brother’s homestead, Ethan Edwards sets out to find his kidnapped niece Debbie. He is driven primarily by family loyalty but also by his secret love for his brother’s wife, who has been raped and killed by the raiders. Ethan’s sidekick, a young man who is part Cherokee, realizes that Ethan plans not to rescue Debbie but to kill her for becoming a Comanche wife. Ethan’s fierce racism and raging vengeance culminate in a raid on the Comanche village. At the film’s close, Ethan returns to civilization but pauses on the cabin’s threshold before turning back to the desert (9.14).

The shot eerily recalls the doorway compositions of Ford’s *Straight Shooting* (9.12); John Wayne even repeats Harry Carey’s characteristic gripping of his forearm (9.15). Now, however, it seems that the drifting cowboy is condemned to live outside civilization because he cannot tame his grief and hatred. More savage than citizen, he seems condemned, as he says of the souls of dead Comanches, “to wander forever between the winds.” This bitter treatment of a perennial theme illustrates how drastically a genre’s conventions can change across history.

The Horror Film

Whereas the Western is most clearly defined by subject, theme, and iconography, the horror genre is most recognizable by the emotional effect it tries to arouse. The horror film aims to shock, disgust, repel—in short, to horrify. This impulse is what shapes the genre’s other conventions.

What can horrify us? Typically, a monster. In the horror film, the monster is a dangerous breach of nature, a violation of our normal sense of what’s possible. The monster might be unnaturally large, as King Kong is. The monster might violate the boundary between the dead and the living, as ghosts, vampires, and zombies do. The monster might be an ordinary human who is transformed, as when Dr. Jekyll drinks his potion and becomes the evil Mr. Hyde. Or the monster might be something wholly unknown to science, as with the creature in the *Alien* films.



9.16

9.16–9.17 Horror implied, not shown. A shadow and a character's reaction suggest an offscreen menace in *Cat People* (9.16). Video surveillance in *Paranormal Activity*: The readout indicates that the heroine, who has mysteriously risen from her sleep, stands transfixed for nearly two hours (9.17).



9.17



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The genre's horrifying emotional effect, then, is usually created by a character convention: a menacing, unnatural monster.

Other conventions follow from this one. Our reaction to the monster may be guided by other characters who react to it in the properly horrified way. In *Cat People* (1942), a mysterious woman can, apparently, turn into a panther. Our revulsion and fear are confirmed by the reaction of the woman's husband and his coworker (9.16). By contrast, we know that *E.T.* is not a horror film because, although the alien is unnatural, he isn't threatening, and the children don't react to him as if he is.

The horror plot will often start with the monster's attack on normal life. In response, the other characters must discover that the monster is at large and try to destroy it. This plot can be developed in various ways: by having the monster launch a series of attacks, by having people in authority resist believing that the monster exists, or by blocking the characters' efforts to destroy it. In *The Exorcist*, the characters only gradually discover that Regan is possessed; after they realize this, they still must struggle to drive the demon out.

The genre's characteristic themes also stem from the response the filmmakers aim to arouse. If the monster horrifies us because it violates the laws of nature that we know, the genre is well suited to suggest the limits of human knowledge. It's probably significant that the skeptical authorities who must be convinced of the monster's existence are often scientists. In other cases, the scientists themselves unintentionally unleash monsters through their risky experiments. A common convention of this type of plot has the characters concluding that there are some things that humans are not meant to know. Another thematic pattern of the horror film plays on fears about the environment, as when nuclear accidents and other human-made disasters create mutant monsters like the giant ants in *Them!*

Not surprisingly, the iconography of the horror film includes settings where monsters might lurk. The old dark house in which a group of potential victims gather was popularized by *The Cat and the Canary* in 1927 and was reused for *The Haunting* (1999) and *The Others* (2001). A more modern version of the haunted house is seen in *Paranormal Activity* (2008; 9.17). Cemeteries can yield the walking dead; scientists' laboratories, an artificial human (as in *Frankenstein*). Filmmakers have played off these conventions cleverly, as when Hitchcock juxtaposed a mundane motel with a decaying mansion in *Psycho*, or when George Romero set humans battling zombies in a shopping mall in *Dawn of the Dead*. The slasher subgenre has made superhuman killers invade everyday settings such as summer camps and suburban neighborhoods.

Heavy makeup is very prominent in the iconography of horror. A furry face and hands can signal transformation into a werewolf, while shriveled skin indicates a mummy. Some actors have specialized in transforming themselves into frightening figures. Lon Chaney, who played the original Phantom in *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), was known as "the man of a thousand faces." Boris Karloff's makeup as Frankenstein's monster in *Frankenstein* (1930) rendered him so unrecognizable that the credits of his next film informed viewers that it featured the same actor. More recently, computer special effects and motion capture have supplemented makeup in transforming actors into beastly creatures.

Like the Western, the horror film emerged in the era of silent moviemaking. Some of the most important early works in the genre were German, notably *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) and *Nosferatu* (1922), the first adaptation of the novel *Dracula*. The angular performances, heavy makeup, and distorted settings characteristic of German Expressionist cinema conveyed an ominous, supernatural atmosphere (9.18).

Because a horror film can create its emotional impact with grisly makeup and other low-technology special effects, the horror genre has been favored by filmmakers on tight budgets. During the 1930s, a second-rank Hollywood studio, Universal, launched a cycle of horror films. The popularity of *Dracula* (1931), *Frankenstein* (1931), and *The Mummy* (1932; 9.19) helped the studio become a major company. A decade later, RKO's B-picture unit under Val Lewton produced a cycle of literate, somber films on minuscule budgets. Lewton's directors proceeded by hints, keeping the monster offscreen and cloaking the sets in darkness. In *Cat People*, for instance, we never see the heroine transform herself into a panther, and we only glimpse the creature in certain scenes. The film achieves its effects through shadows, offscreen sound, and character reaction (9.16).

In later decades, horror became a staple of 1960s low-budget independent production, with many American entries targeted at the youth market. George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was budgeted at only \$114,000, but it found wide success on college campuses. At the other end of the budgetary scale, the genre acquired a new respectability, chiefly because of the prestige of *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *The Exorcist* (1973). These films innovated by presenting violent and disgusting actions with unprecedented explicitness. When the possessed Regan vomited in the face of the priest bending over her, a new standard for horrific imagery was set. Decades later, the *Saw* series raised the gore quotient even higher.

The horror film entered into a period of popularity that has not yet ended. Many major Hollywood directors have worked in the genre, and several horror films—from *Jaws* (1975) and *Carrie* (1976) to installments in the *Twilight* saga (2008 on)—have become huge hits. Low-budget horror has flourished as well. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), shot for a reputed \$35,000, found a huge audience internationally. A decade later, *Paranormal Activity*, shot for \$11,000, earned a spectacular \$200 million at worldwide box offices.

More broadly, the genre's iconography pervades contemporary culture, decorating lunch boxes and theme park rides. Horror novels by Stephen King and Stephenie Meyer have been adapted for films and TV series, while genre classics such as *The Mummy* and *Frankenstein* have been remade for



9.18 German Expressionist horror. In *Nosferatu*, Max Schreck's makeup and acting make his Count Orlok eerily resemble a rat or a bat.

“Our formula is simple. A love story, three scenes of suggested horror and one of actual violence. Fade-out. It's all over in less than 70 minutes.”

—Val Lewton, producer, *Cat People*



9.19 Subtle horror on a low budget. A tiny gleam reflected in Boris Karloff's eye signals the moment when the monster revives in *The Mummy*.



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modern audiences. The interest in producing horror films is global, with Europe and Asia adding to the repertory with *Anatomy* (Germany), *28 Days Later* (UK), *Nightwatch* (Russia), *The Host* (South Korea), *The Ring* (Japan), *The Devil's Backbone* (Spain), *Let the Right One In* (Sweden), and many more titles.

The centrality of horror to modern American cinema has set scholars looking for cultural explanations. Many critics suggest that the 1970s subgenre of family horror films, such as *The Exorcist* and *Poltergeist*, reflects social concerns about the breakup of American families. Others propose that the genre's questioning of traditional categories of normality is in tune with both the post-Vietnam and the post-Cold War eras: Viewers may be uncertain of their fundamental beliefs about the world and their identity. Fans are also drawn by the imaginative special effects and makeup, so filmmakers compete to show ever gorier and more grotesque imagery. For all these reasons, horror-film conventions grew so familiar that parodies such as the *Scary Movie* franchise and *Shaun of the Dead* became as popular as the films they mocked. Through genre mixing and the give-and-take between audience tastes and filmmakers' ambitions, the horror film has displayed the interplay of convention and innovation that's basic to any genre.

The Musical

The Western is largely based on the subject matter of the American frontier, and the horror film is characterized by the emotional effect it wants to arouse. By contrast, the musical came into being in response to a technological innovation. Although there had been attempts to synchronize music and song with moving images during the silent era, the notion of basing a feature-length film on a series of musical numbers did not emerge until the late 1920s with the successful introduction of recorded sound tracks. One of the earliest features to include the human voice extensively was *The Jazz Singer* (1927), which contained almost no recorded dialogue but had several songs.

At first, many musicals were *revues*, programs of numbers with little or no narrative linkage between them. Such revue musicals aided in selling these early sound films in foreign-language markets, where spectators could enjoy the performances even if they could not understand the dialogue and lyrics. When subtitles and dubbing solved the problem of the language barrier, musicals featured more complicated storylines. Filmmakers devised plots that could motivate the introduction of musical numbers.

Two major subgenres of the musical emerged during the 1930s and are still with us. One of these was the *backstage musical*, with the action centering on singers and dancers who perform for an audience within the story world. Warner Bros. successful early musical, *42nd Street* (1933), set the classic pattern for backstage musicals by casting dancer Ruby Keeler as the understudy for a star who breaks her leg just before the big opening. The director tells Keeler, "You're going out a youngster, but you've got to come back a star!" and indeed she wins the audience's cheers (9.20). During the decade, Warner's elaborately choreographed Busby Berkeley musicals, MGM's pairing of the youthful Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in a series of "Let's put on a show!" plots, and RKO's elegant cycle of films starring the dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers established the conventions of the backstage musical. Later examples included musicals in which the characters are film performers, as in *Singin' in the Rain* (1952). More recent backstage musicals are *The Commitments*, *Music and Lyrics*, *Jersey Boys*, and *Dreamgirls*. In some cases, dance competitions become the equivalent of stage shows, as in *You Got Served* and *Stomp the Yard*.

Not all musicals take place in a show-business situation, however. There is also the *straight musical*, where people may sing and dance in situations of everyday life. Even in backstage musicals, the characters occasionally break into song in an everyday setting. Straight musicals tend to be romantic comedies as well, so that

“[Producer Arthur Freed] came to me and said, ‘What are you going to do with it?’ I said, ‘Well, Arthur, I don’t know yet. But I do know I’ve gotta be singing and it’s gotta be raining.’ There was no rain in that picture up to then.”

—Gene Kelly, actor/choreographer, on *Singin' in the Rain*



9.20



9.21

9.20–9.21 Backstage musical vs. straight musical. Ruby Keeler hoofs her way to stardom in *42nd Street*'s title number (9.20). The citizens of a whole town are drawn into the dance in Jacques Demy's *Young Girls of Rochefort* (9.21).

songs and dances express the characters' fears, longings, and joys. We analyze one straight musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, in Chapter 11. In 1968, *The Young Girls of Rochefort* took the romantic musical to extremes by having its characters sing most of the dialogue in the film, with dozens of passersby joining in dance numbers in the town's streets (9.21). Straight musicals are rare today, but Julie Taymor made an effort to revive the subgenre in *Across the Universe*, basing the score entirely on Beatles songs and adding social commentary in the spirit of the 1960s (9.22).

In both backstage and straight musicals, the numbers often reflect a couple's courtship. Often the hero and heroine realize that they are an ideal couple because they perform beautifully together. In *Top Hat* the Ginger Rogers character sheds her original annoyance with Fred Astaire during the "Isn't It a Wonderful Day" number, and by the end, they have clearly fallen in love. This plot device has remained a staple of the genre. Astaire again charms his reluctant partner, this time Cyd Charisse, in the "Dancing in the Dark" number in *The Band Wagon* (1953), and John Travolta meets his romantic match on the disco dance floor in *Saturday Night Fever* (1977). In *Moulin Rouge!* the lovers serenade each other, both onstage and off, with classic pop and rock songs (9.23), and the dance interludes in the *House Party* and *Step Up* films become courtship rituals.

Musicals have long been associated with children's stories, from *The Wizard of Oz* to *Frozen*. Many animated features contain musical numbers, a practice going back to Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. But adult-oriented



9.22 A musical evoking 1960s counterculture. In *Across the Universe*, a young man taking his army draft physical is greeted by the Beatles song "I Want You." The film was released at the height of the U.S. occupation of Iraq.



9.23 Performance as courtship. A flamboyant onstage musical number in *Moulin Rouge!* centers on the rapturous lovers.



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Big musicals may be rare these days, but small ones thrive online as mash-ups and lipdubs. See our “2-4-6-8, whose lipdub do we appreciate?”

musicals have taken on more serious material. *West Side Story* portrays a romance that tragically crosses ethnic lines, and *Pennies from Heaven* evokes the bleak atmosphere of the Depression through characters who lip-synch to recordings from that era. Biopics of troubled performers, such as *Control*, *Get on Up*, and *Walk the Line*, become somber backstage musicals.

Still, while the Western and the horror film may explore the darker side of human nature, Hollywood musicals tend to accentuate the positive. High ambitions are rewarded when the show is a hit, and lovers are united in song and dance. In *The Pajama Game*, a strike is averted when the leaders of the union and management become a romantic couple. Some of these conventions persist today. *The School of Rock* and today's hip-hop and stepping musicals rework the backstage musical's theme that talent and hard work will eventually win out. Even the grittier *8 Mile* follows the traditional plot pattern of showing a gifted young performer overcoming disadvantages and finding success.

The range of subject matter in musicals is so broad that it may be hard to pin down specific iconography associated with the genre. The backstage musical has its characteristic settings: the dressing rooms and wings of a theater, the flats and backdrops of the stage (as in 9.20), and the nightclub with orchestra and dance floor. Similarly, performers in these musicals are often recognizable by their distinctive stage costumes. During the 1930s, Fred Astaire wore the most famous top hat in the cinema, a hat so closely associated with his musicals that the beginning of *The Band Wagon*—where Astaire plays a washed-up movie actor—could make a joke about it. Similarly, Travolta's white suit in *Saturday Night Fever* became an icon of the disco era. Opportunities for novelty have always been present in the musical, however, as the musical numbers set in a factory (*The Pajama Game*) or on the prairie (*Oklahoma!*) indicate.

The characteristic techniques of the musical are similarly diverse. Musical numbers tend to be brightly lit, to set off the cheerful costumes and sets and to keep the choreography of the dance numbers clearly visible. For similar reasons, color film stock was applied quite early to musicals, including Eddie Cantor's *Whoopie!* and, as we saw in Chapter 2, *The Wizard of Oz*. While classic musicals tend to rely on long takes, contemporary musicals tend to be cut very quickly, partly because of the influence of MTV videos. Still, to show off the patterns formed by the dancers in musical numbers, crane shots and high angles remain common (9.24). One technique widely used in the musical is not usually evident to viewers: lip-synching to prerecorded songs. On the set, performers move their lips in synchronization to a playback of the recording. This technique allows the singers to move about freely and to concentrate on their acting.



9.24 Genre motivation for stylistic choices. Swooping crane shots emphasize the geometry and coordination of an ensemble in *Stomp the Yard*.

The 1935 RKO Astaire-Rogers musical *Swing Time* is one of the exemplary backstage musicals. Early in the film, the hero, a gambler and tap dancer nicknamed Lucky, is trying to quit his stage act and get married. At once, we sense that his fiancée is not right for him. She isn't a dancer, and she isn't even seen during the early scenes in which his colleagues try to trick him into missing the wedding. The opening scenes take place in the conventional settings of the stage, wings, and dressing room of a theater. Later, when Lucky goes to the city and meets the heroine, Penny (a name that echoes Lucky's precious lucky quarter), she quickly takes a strong dislike to him. An amusing scene in the dance school where she works shows Lucky pretending to be hopelessly clumsy. Yet when the school's owner fires Penny, Lucky saves her job by suddenly launching into a graceful, unrehearsed dance with her. By the end, her animosity has disappeared, and the school owner arranges for the couple to audition at a fashionable club.

Obstacles ensue, primarily in the form of a romantic rivalry between Lucky and the orchestra leader at the club. Further complications result from the sort of Big Misunderstanding characteristic of romantic comedies: Penny thinks that Lucky intends to return to his fiancée. Near the end, Penny seems ready to marry the conductor. She and Lucky meet, apparently for the last time, and their talk at cross-purposes reveals the link between performance and romance:

PENNY: “Does she dance very beautifully?”

LUCKY: “Who?”

PENNY: “The girl you're in love with?”

LUCKY: “Yes—very.”

PENNY: “The girl you're going to marry.”

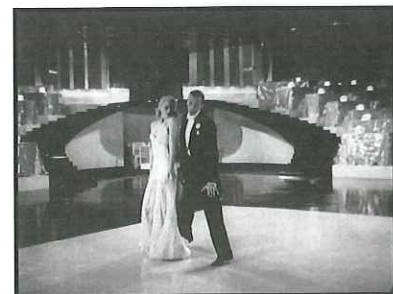
LUCKY: “Oh, I don't know. I've danced with you. I'm never going to dance again.”

That Fred Astaire will never dance again is the ultimate threat, and his song “Never Gonna Dance” leads into a duet that reconfirms that they are meant for each other. In the end, Lucky and Penny reconcile.

The film calls on the newly established conventions of the genre. Lucky wears Astaire's classic top hat and formal clothes (9.25). Astaire and Rogers dance in the Art Deco-style sets that were typical of musical design in the 1930s (9.26). The film departs from convention, however, in a remarkable number, “Bojangles of Harlem,” where Astaire pays tribute to the great



9.25



9.26

9.25–9.26 *Swing Time* as musical. After losing his suit in a card game, Lucky still wears Astaire's signature top hat (9.25). Penny and Lucky dance in the Art Deco nightclub set (9.26).



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We discuss other genres on our blog. For the relationship between fantasy and sci-fi films in recent years, see “Swords vs. lightsabers,” and for movies based on superhero comic books, see “Superheroes for sale.” We analyze spy-thriller conventions in “*Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*: A guide for the perplexed” and our entries on the *Bourne* franchise. We consider as well how *Safe Haven*, *Side Effects*, and *Gone Girl* draw on strategies of narration typical of the domestic thriller.

African-American dancers who had influenced him during his New York stage career in the 1920s. When he appears in blackface here, it is not to exploit a demeaning stereotype but to impersonate Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, the most famous black tap dancer of the era. (The tribute is all the more unusual because Robinson was then costarring in Shirley Temple musicals for a rival studio, Twentieth Century Fox.)

Despite its backstage settings and show business plot, *Swing Time* sets some numbers in an everyday environment. When Lucky visits Penny’s apartment, he sings “The Way You Look Tonight” as she shampoos her hair—using a convenient piano in her apartment to accompany himself (though a nondiegetic orchestra plays along as well). When the couple visits the snowy countryside and sings “A Fine Romance,” there is no diegetic accompaniment at all, only an unseen orchestra. The world of the musical makes it possible for people, at any time and in any place, to express their feelings through song and dance.

The Sports Film

You could argue that sports movies don’t form a genre in the way Westerns, horror films, and musicals do. Perhaps basketball, baseball, prizefighting, and other sports are simply subject matter for more traditional genres—dramas like *Friday Night Lights*, romantic comedies like *Wimbledon*. But sports films have been a staple of film history since boxing matches drew audiences to Edison Kinetoscope parlors. And just as there are fans of science fiction movies and gross-out comedies, there is a distinct audience for sports films.

Sports films display their own plot patterns, iconography, and themes. Competition and tournaments provide conflict, while a climactic win-or-lose big game can resolve the action and provide closure. Suspense and surprise are built into sporting events. Just as important, films about sports can raise larger ideological issues. Succeeding in amateur sports can emphasize either individual achievement or group accomplishment. Professional sports give athletes access to money and power, and so the genre can develop themes of social mobility. And to a surprising extent, sports films explore themes of racial and gender roles.

One common plot pattern is the Cinderella story, showing how an underdog overcomes long odds to make it in the big leagues or to compete for a championship. The film may have a central protagonist, as in *Rocky* and *The Rookie*. Or the plot may focus on a group, usually a ragtag bunch that learns to overcome personal differences and work as a team. This plot pattern shapes *The Bad News Bears* (1976), *Major League*, and *Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story*. Other Cinderella plots, such as those in *Slap Shot* and *Any Given Sunday*, match grizzled veterans with rising young stars in ways that highlight their differences in age, expertise, values, and styles of play.

Critics may call the Cinderella pattern a cliché, but any sport contains real-life examples of underdogs beating the odds. Actual success stories were the basis of *Miracle* (2004), about the 1980 United States Olympic hockey team, and *The World’s Fastest Indian* (9.27). Cinderella stories appeal to the audience because the hero or heroes are unlikely to succeed, and we sympathize with characters who risk everything for a dream.

A second plot type in sports movies depicts athletes in the prime of their careers who are felled by disease or injury. Examples are *Pride of the Yankees*, *Bang the Drum Slowly*, and *Million Dollar Baby*. These movies show how easily the conventions of sports films can mix with other genres, such as the medical drama or the melodrama. In *Eight Men Out* and *The Hurricane* (1999), the athlete’s career is cut short by social factors, such as scandal or a biased judicial system. Like the Cinderella story, the prime-of-life storyline is made more plausible by being based on actual events.

Then there are films like *Fear Strikes Out*, *The Color of Money*, and *Seabiscuit*. Their plots resemble the Cinderella story in depicting battles against big odds, and they depend on the interrupted-career situation. But these films center on the athlete’s comeback, a return to glory after battling personal demons. Comeback stories present the sport as a meritocracy: You can overcome almost any mistake if you have powerful skills and enduring passion.

Along with these plot types come character conventions: the tough coach, the dedicated but flawed athlete, the unscrupulous adversary, and the mate—male or female—who resents the partner’s obsession with winning at all costs. A few films focus on figures more peripheral to the actual sporting event. *The Scout* and *Million Dollar Arm* dramatize efforts to nurture raw baseball talent. In *Jerry McGuire*, a cocky sports agent tries to build a company around the career of a temperamental wide receiver. *Moneyball* and *Draft Day* concentrate on maverick general managers who take risks to field a contender.

Some sports films deviate sharply from these conventions of plot and character. Normally we are emotionally invested in the athlete’s quest for a championship, but *Raging Bull* complicates our sympathy. Its hero, Jake La Motta, seems fueled by an almost pathological jealousy and by his acceptance of boxing as a brutal bloodsport. (For more on *Raging Bull*, see Chapter 11.)

Similarly, in *Cobb*, awarts-and-all biography of Detroit Tiger great Ty Cobb, writer-director Ron Shelton probes the dark side of the baseball legend. Cobb was a fierce competitor, willing to hurt an opponent if he could gain an edge. He was an expert base stealer, who slid into the bag “spikes up,” hoping to use his cleats to gash any player in his path. Off the field, Cobb was a racist, a woman-hater, and a bully. Instead of presenting an admirable athlete, *Cobb* reminds us that some competitors channel their personal demons into their performance.

In another departure from sports film conventions, a few movies concentrate on fans. *Fever Pitch* tells the story of Ben, whose obsessive passion for the Red Sox impedes his romance with his girlfriend, Lindsay. Initially, Lindsay treats Ben’s fixation as an amusing personality quirk. But Lindsay realizes that Ben is unwilling to consider their future together; he won’t even make vacation plans without consulting the Sox’s schedule.

In making Ben a Red Sox fan, directors Peter and Bobby Farrelly shrewdly capitalized on the folklore surrounding the “lovable losers” of the baseball world. The Red Sox had not won a world championship since 1918, but in 2004 they wound up winning the world series. By sheer luck, the Sox’s championship season gave the Farrellys an unexpected ending that combined the Cinderella story and the comeback story (9.28).



9.27 Underdog stories. Burt Munro, an elderly New Zealander, seems an especially unlikely racing champion in *The World’s Fastest Indian*. At age 67, though, Munro set land speed records at Utah’s Bonneville salt flats on a self-modified 1920 Indian motorcycle. Director Roger Donaldson had already filmed Munro’s story in a short documentary, *Burt Munro: Offerings to the God of Speed*.



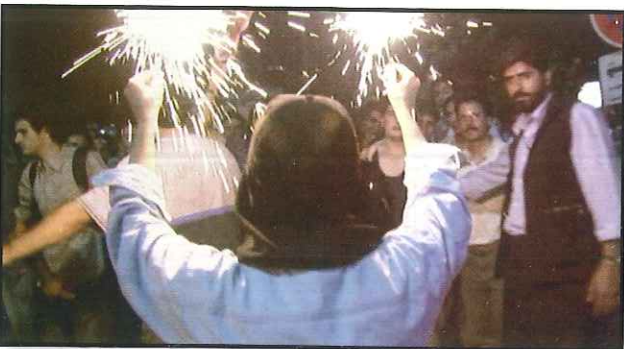
9.28 Sports movies about fans. After the unlikely Red Sox World Series victory in 2004, the Farrellys took advantage of the moment to surreptitiously film *Fever Pitch*’s Ben and Lindsay celebrating the team’s clinching victory on the field of Busch Stadium in St. Louis.

The Iranian film *Offside* adds a fresh thematic twist to sports film conventions. Using the 2005 match between Bahrain and Iran as a backdrop, *Offside* focuses on a group of female fans of the Iranian team who disguise themselves as men and try to sneak into Azadi Stadium. The plot of *Offside* initially centers on a girl paying her first surreptitious visit to a game. (We later learn that the girl's scheme is a tribute to her friend, a die-hard soccer fan killed in riots after the 2005 Iran-Japan World Cup match.) Security policemen see through the girl's disguise and take her to an improvised detention area. The bulk of the film's plot takes place around this holding pen. As we come to know the other female fans held there, we hear the match's progress offscreen; like the women, we will never see the actual game.

By keeping the main event out of sight, *Offside* highlights the religious, cultural, and gender issues that affect an entire community. As the match progresses, the soldiers and the girls gradually develop trust with one another. Yet their friendly relations are sometimes overshadowed by social taboos on women's roles. The situation leads to somewhat absurd complications. Only men are allowed in Azadi Stadium, so there are no women's restrooms. When one of the detainees needs to use the toilet, the soldier accompanying her takes several steps to preserve her virtue. First, the soldier makes the girl wait as he shoos men out of the lavatory. Then, when the soldier sees graffiti written on the restroom's walls, he instructs the girl to wear a poster over her face to shield her eyes (9.29).



9.29 Gender and religious taboo in *Offside*. Because the makeshift mask obstructs her vision, the woman must grope her way to a toilet stall, a situation that provides a comic and poignant comment on how traditions make even ordinary activities difficult.



9.30 Sports and social bonding in *Offside*. The female soccer fans join the crowds celebrating Iran's victory over Bahrain. The girl shown at the start of the film waves seven sparklers, one for each of the victims killed in the riots that occurred after the Iran-Japan match.

In scenes like this, director Jafar Panahi blends implicit commentary on social ideology with a concern for flesh-and-blood individuals. *Offside* is filled with small vignettes showing soldiers and detainees' growing awareness that they are mutually constrained by Iran's larger social structures. The soldiers must confront the fact that women can have deep love and knowledge of this apparently men's-only sport. Similarly, the female fans resent being shut out, but they come to understand that the soldiers are doing their duty as defined by Islamic law.

In the film's final scenes, the bus carrying the soldiers and detainees gets stuck in traffic. Masses of people have taken to the streets in hope of Iran's victory over the Bahrain team. While the men go to get snacks, the camera stays with the women on the bus. A shop window shows them a TV broadcast of the final seconds. Iran wins, the crowd goes wild, and the soldiers are swept up in the street celebration. With no one to guard them, the women join the cheering, singing, and dancing crowds. The final image is a long tracking shot that follows these female fans parading through the streets of Tehran (9.30). An Iranian national anthem plays nondiegetically over this final shot, showing that women are not only loyal fans but loyal citizens.

Like many genre films, *Offside* ritualistically resolves the drama's social problems. The conclusion dissolves the gender differences under Islamic law and absorbs everyone into the larger community. On this triumphant night, sports becomes the glue that holds the nation together.

Although the sports film might seem to be a masculine genre, women's concerns also surface in *A League of Their Own* and *Bend It Like Beckham*. Other films, like *Remember the Titans*, *Glory Road*, and *42*, explore cultural attitudes toward race. *Offside* has used the genre to present a modest and sympathetic portrait of female fans as a cross section

of Iranian society. In this respect, it reminds us that the sports film can merge a concern for social issues with engaging dramas of suspenseful competition.

In studying film, we often need to make explicit some things we ordinarily take for granted—those assumptions so fundamental that we no longer even notice them. Genres are examples of such taken-for-granted categories. At the back of our minds whenever we watch a film, these categories govern what we expect to see and hear. They guide our reactions. They press us to make sense of a movie in certain ways. Shared by filmmakers and viewers alike, genre categories shape film art as we most often experience it.

Still other kinds of categories guide our assumptions about the films we see. If we look beyond live-action fictional features, we find alternative modes of filmmaking. These depend on ways in which the films are made and the intentions of the filmmakers, and they often have distinctive approaches to form and style. The most common modes are documentary, experimental, and animated cinema. We examine these in the next chapter.



SUMMARY

One of the most common ways in which we approach films is by type, or genre. Genres are categories that are largely shared across society, by filmmakers, critics, and viewers. Films are most commonly grouped into genres by virtue of similar plot patterns, similar thematic implications, characteristic filmic techniques, and recognizable iconography.

When trying to characterize a film genre, you can ask such questions as these:

1. Before you saw the film, did you know what genre or subgenre it belonged to? What factors in advance publicity or conversation gave you hints?
2. What conventions in the film signal its genre? How do those conventions function? Do they allow storytelling to be more rapid and economical? Do they aim to arouse strong emotional responses?
3. What genre innovations can you find in the film? A good way to determine these is to ask if your expectations were thrown off at certain points.
4. Does this film seem to be combining conventions from more than one genre? If so, how does it make the genre elements compatible? Do innovative aspects of the film depend on the genre mixing, and if so, how?

CHAPTER

10

Documentary,
Experimental, and
Animated Films

Studying genres shows that categories shape our experience of films. Our sense of genre guides our expectations: We anticipate one sort of thing from a comedy, something quite different from a horror film. Our knowledge of the genre's conventions shapes what we think is likely to happen from moment to moment.

There are still other ways to categorize films. Viewers and filmmakers distinguish documentary from fiction, experimental films from mainstream fare, and animation from live-action filming. Each of these types of film leads us to different sorts of expectations about form, style, and theme.

In a way, these types are more basic categories than genres. Most of our familiar genres are fiction films; it would be odd to call a documentary about witchcraft a horror movie. A cartoon can be a musical or a comedy, but more basically it's an animated movie. Chapter 3, on narrative form, drew its examples principally from fictional, live-action, nonexperimental cinema. Now we explore these other important types of films.

Documentary

Before we see a film, we nearly always have some sense whether it is a documentary or a piece of fiction. Moviegoers entering theaters to view *March of the Penguins* expected to see real birds in nature, not the wisecracking penguins of *Madagascar*. A filmmaker launching a project will keep in mind the fiction/nonfiction distinction, although sometimes the project will change directions. Errol Morris began what became the documentary *Vernon, Florida* as a fictional film set in that city. And the same incident can be treated in the two modes. Werner Herzog remade his documentary on a Vietnam-era fighter pilot, *Little Dieter Needs to Fly*, as a fiction film, *Rescue Dawn*.

What Is a Documentary?

What justifies viewers assuming that this or that film is a documentary? With two films titled *Spellbound*, how do we know that one is a Hitchcock thriller and the other is about children's spelling contests? For one thing, a documentary typically comes labeled as such. The filmmakers tell us through publicity, and press coverage reinforces the message. (The *New York Times* review of *Spellbound* called it a documentary

in the first paragraph.) In turn, the documentary label leads us to expect that the persons, places, and events shown to us exist or have existed. We'd feel cheated if the kids in *Spellbound*, struggling to spell "logorrhea," were in fact actors. A documentary claims to present factual information about the world.

This information can be presented in a variety of ways. In some cases, the filmmakers are able to record events as they actually occur (10.1). This is what happened in *Spellbound*, with filmmaker Jeff Blitz filming the 1999 National Spelling Bee. In making *Primary*, an account of John Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey campaigning for the 1960 Democratic presidential nomination, the camera operator and sound recordist were able to closely follow the candidates through crowds at rallies (5.145).

But a documentary may also convey information without photographing events as they're occurring. The filmmaker might present charts, maps, or other visual aids (10.2), even using animation. In addition, the filmmaker might stage certain events for the camera to record.

Staging Events for the Camera It's worth pausing on that last point. Some viewers suspect that a documentary is unreliable if it manipulates the events that are filmed. It is true that, very often, the documentary filmmaker records an event without scripting or staging it. For example, in interviewing an eyewitness, the documentarist typically controls where the camera is placed, what is in focus, and so on. The filmmaker likewise controls the final editing of the images. But the filmmaker doesn't tell the witness what to say or how to act. The filmmaker may also have no choice about setting or lighting.

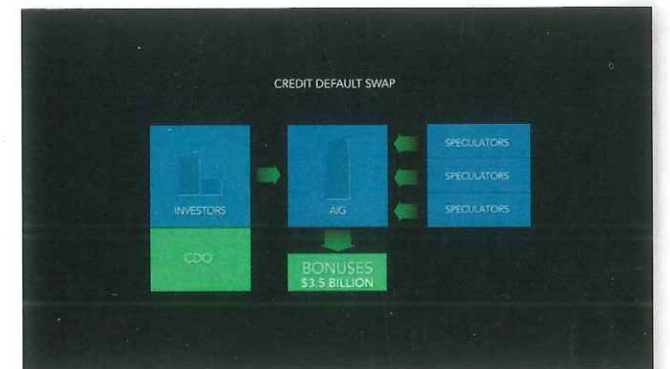
Still, viewers and filmmakers regard some staging as legitimate in a documentary if the staging serves the larger purpose of presenting accurate information. Suppose you are filming a farmer's daily routines. You might ask him or her to walk toward a field in order to frame a shot showing the whole farm. After all, walking into the field is something the farmer does when the camera isn't there. The title performer in Dziga Vertov's documentary *Man with a Movie Camera* is clearly performing for Vertov's camera, but he's not doing things he wouldn't do ordinarily (10.3).

Some documentaries make extensive use of staging. For *Man on Wire*, director James Marsh had very little footage of acrobat Philippe Petit's astounding wire-walking between New York's World Trade Center towers. To clarify how Petit and his associates sneaked into the buildings and set up the stunt, Marsh assigned actors to reenact their tactics. In some cases, staging may intensify the documentary value of the film. Humphrey Jennings made *Fires Were Started* during the German bombardment of London in World War II. Unable to film during the air raids, Jennings found a group of bombed-out buildings and set them afire. He then filmed the fire patrol battling the blaze (10.4). Similarly, after Allied troops liberated the Auschwitz concentration camp near the end of World War II, a newsreel cameraman assembled a group of children and had them roll up their sleeves to display the prisoner numbers tattooed on their arms. This staging of the action arguably enhanced the film's reliability.

Documentary restaging is at the center of *The Act of Killing*, which centers on Indonesian death squads of the 1960s. After the army took power, gangsters were hired to kill anyone labeled as a communist. In a single year, over a million men,



10.1

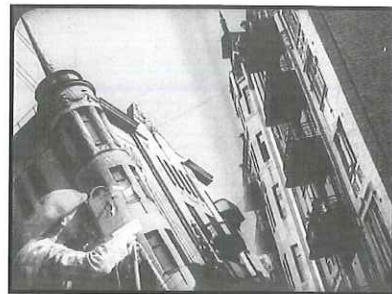


10.2

10.1–10.2 On the scene or after the fact. For *The War Tapes*, lightweight digital video equipment allowed National Guard fighters to present their perspective on their tours of duty in Iraq. Here a U.S. serviceman, filming from a military vehicle, captures the explosion of a roadside bomb (10.1). But some things can't be directly filmed, so *Inside Job* includes animated charts to illustrate causes of the 2007–2008 financial collapse (10.2).

“There are lots of in-between stages from shooting to public projection—developing, printing, editing, commentary, sound effects, music. At each stage the effect of the shot can be changed but the basic content must be in the shot to begin with.”

—Joris Ivens, documentary filmmaker



10.3



10.4

10.3–10.4 Staging in documentary. Although the central figure of *Man with a Movie Camera* is an actual cinematographer, his actions were staged (10.3). Blazes like this in *Fires Were Started* were staged, but the firefighters judged the film to be an accurate depiction of their challenges under real bombing (10.4).

women, and children were massacred. Joshua Oppenheimer, a strong critic of the regime, follows the killers today as they bully and extort money, and he shows rallies in which government officials praise them as national heroes.

After the killers boast of their crimes, they accept Oppenheimer's invitation to make a film displaying their methods of torture and murder (10.5). As a result, *The Act of Killing* makes assertions about both the past and the present. The killers demonstrate what they did in 1965, and nearly all their comments and brutal reenactments show that today they feel no guilt. Both the participants and the filmmaker ask us to take the staged scenes as trustworthy depictions of horrific historical events.

Truth and Opinion in Documentary As a type of film, documentaries present themselves as factually trustworthy, but across film history many documentaries have been challenged as inaccurate. *An Inconvenient Truth*, Vice-President Al Gore's film about global warming, was accused in some quarters of presenting weak arguments and skewed data. Even if its claims proved false, however, *An Inconvenient Truth* would not then turn into a fiction film. An unreliable documentary is still a documentary. Just as there are inaccurate or misleading news stories, so there are inaccurate or misleading documentaries.

A documentary may take a stand, state an opinion, or advocate a solution to a problem. As we'll see shortly, documentaries often use rhetoric to persuade an audience. But simply mounting an argument does not turn the documentary into fiction. To persuade us, the filmmaker marshals evidence, and this evidence is put forth as being factual and reliable. A documentary may be strongly partisan in its viewpoint, but as a documentary, it presents itself as providing trustworthy information about its subject.

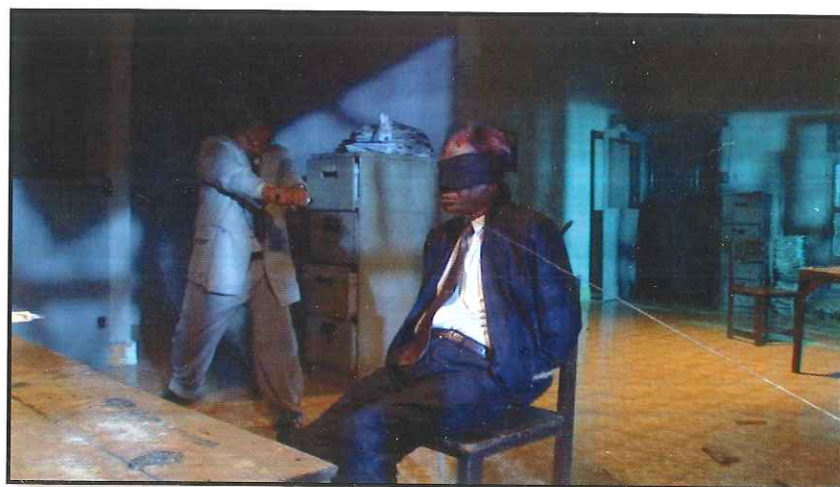
The Boundaries between Documentary and Fiction

Fictional Films and Actuality Shown a fictional film, we assume that it presents imaginary beings, places, or events. We take it for granted that Don Vito Corleone and his family never existed, and that their activities, as depicted in *The Godfather*, never took place. Yet just because a film is fictional, that doesn't mean that it's completely unrelated to actuality.

For one thing, not everything shown or implied by a fiction film need be imaginary. *The Godfather* alludes to World War II and the building of Las Vegas, both historical events; it takes place in New York City and in Sicily, both real locales. Nonetheless, the characters and their activities remain fictional, with history and geography providing a context for the made-up elements.

Fictional films are tied to actuality in another way. They often comment on the real world. *Dave*, about an imaginary U.S. president and his corrupt administration, criticizes contemporary political conduct. In 1943, some viewers took Carl Dreyer's *Day of Wrath*, a film about witch-hunts and prejudice in 17th-century Denmark, as a covert protest against the Nazis currently occupying the country. Through theme, subject, characterization, and other means, a fictional film can directly or obliquely present ideas about the world outside the film.

Sometimes our response to a fictional film is shaped by our assumptions about how it was made. The typical fictional film stages all or nearly all its events; they are designed, planned, rehearsed, filmed, and refilmed. The studio mode of production is well suited to creating fiction films, since it allows stories to be scripted and action to be staged until what



10.5 Reenacting murder. Indonesian gangsters stage their strangulation method for their film. They adopt a film noir style in tribute to the Hollywood movies they claim inspired them.

is captured on film satisfies the decision makers. As a result, in a fictional film, the characters are portrayed by actors. The camera films not Vito Corleone but Marlon Brando portraying the Don.

This assumption about how the film was made typically comes into play when we consider historical films or biographies. *Apollo 13*, *Schindler's List*, and *Margin Call* base themselves on actual events, while *Malcolm X*, *Walk the Line*, *Milk*, *The Iron Lady*, *Selma*, *The Imitation Game*, and other *biopics* trace episodes in the lives of people who really existed. Should we call these documentaries or fictional films?

In practice, most such films add purely make-believe characters, speeches, or actions. (Because of copyright restrictions *Selma*'s writers even changed the wording of Martin Luther King's speeches.) But even if the films didn't tamper with the record at all, they would remain fictional according to our assumptions about how they were produced. The events we see aren't taking place at the time of the actual events. More important, the films don't present themselves as documentaries. They come to us labeled as historical re-creations or reenactments that take liberties with actual events.

Blurring the Boundaries As you might expect, filmmakers have sometimes tried to test our ability to distinguish documentary from fiction. A notorious example is Mitchell Block's *No Lies*, which purports to present an interview with a woman who has been raped. Audiences are usually disturbed by the woman's emotional account and by the callousness of the offscreen filmmaker questioning her. A final title, however, reveals that the film was scripted and that the woman was an actor. Part of Block's purpose was to show how presenting a film as a documentary can induce viewers to believe in the reality of what they see.

Most fake documentaries, or "mockumentaries," are not this serious. Often mock documentaries imitate documentary conventions but don't pretend to portray actual people or events. This strategy turns the film into fiction. A classic case is Rob Reiner's *This Is Spinal Tap*, which uses documentary conventions to satirize rock bands and their followers.

A filmmaker may fuse documentary and fiction in other ways. For *JFK*, Oliver Stone inserted documentary footage into scenes in which actors played historical figures such as Lee Harvey Oswald. Stone also staged and filmed the assassination of Kennedy in a pseudo-documentary manner. Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line*, a documentary investigation into a murder, mixes interviews and archival material with episodes performed by actors. The sequences, far from being the jittery reenactments of television true-crime shows, are shot with smooth camera work, dramatic lighting, and vibrant color (10.6). The result is a film that not only seeks to identify the real killer but also raises questions about how fact and fiction may mingle (see pp. 436–441).

Genres of Documentary

As with fiction films, the documentary filmmaker faces choices about genre. One common documentary genre is the *compilation* film, produced by assembling images from archival sources. *The Atomic Cafe* compiles newsreel footage and instructional films to suggest how 1950s American culture reacted to the proliferation of nuclear weapons (10.7). The *interview*, or *talking-heads*, documentary records testimony about events or social movements. *Word Is Out* consists largely of interviews with lesbians and gay men discussing their lives.

The *direct-cinema* documentary characteristically records an ongoing event as it happens, with minimal interference by the filmmaker. Direct cinema emerged in the 1950s and 1960s, when portable camera and sound equipment became available and allowed films such as *Primary* to follow an event as it unfolds. For this reason, such documentaries are also known as *cinéma-vérité*, French for "cinema-truth." *Hoop Dreams* traces two aspiring basketball players moving through high school and into college, while *Citizen Four* records several days in the life of Edward Snowden, on the run for exposing classified security information. The deceptiveness of *No Lies* owed something to its being shot in the style of *cinéma-vérité*.



10.6 Signaling manipulation. Carefully composed shots such as this from *The Thin Blue Line* emphasize the fact that some events have been reenacted. Several of these staged sequences dramatize witnesses' alternative versions of the crime.



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Portrait of Jason, a classic of direct-cinema documentary, is examined in "I'll never tell: Jason reborn."



10.7

10.7–10.9 Documentary genres: Compilation, portraiture, and synthesis. Old footage of protective radiation gear was incorporated into *The Atomic Café* (10.7). *Searching for Sugar Man* portrays a little-known singer who became a cult figure in the 1970s and then disappeared (10.8). Ten days before his death, the protagonist of *Grizzly Man* displays his intimacy with the bears he loves (10.9).



10.8



10.9

Another common type is the *nature* documentary such as *Winged Migration*, which used in-flight cameras to soar and float along with birds. A *portrait* documentary centers on aspects of the life of a compelling person. Terry Zwigoff's *Crumb* captures the eccentricities of underground cartoonist Robert Crumb and his family. *Searching for Sugar Man* presents many sides of the career of a mysterious blues singer (10.8).

Very often a documentary pursues several of these genre options at once. A film may mix archival footage, interviews, and material shot on the fly, as do *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *The Fog of War*, and *An Unreasonable Man*, a portrait documentary centering on Ralph Nader. *Wordplay*, a study of crossword-puzzle fans, interweaves portraits of makers and solvers along with the drama of the annual American crossword competition. This *synthetic* documentary format is also common in television journalism.

Werner Herzog makes memorable use of the synthetic approach in the portrait film *Grizzly Man*. An adventurous young man, Timothy Treadwell, became convinced that he had made friends with the bears in a national park. But he was wrong: He and his girlfriend were killed and partially eaten by a bear. Herzog combines his own present-day inquiry into Treadwell's life, consisting of interviews and explorations of the park sites, with still photos and letters that cover Treadwell's efforts to protect the bears. Most vivid are the extracts from Treadwell's own video footage showing his encounters with grizzlies (10.9).

Form in Documentary Films

Back in Chapter 3, we mentioned that stories offer a major lens through which people understand their world and their lives. So we shouldn't be surprised that many documentarists organize their films as narratives, just as makers of fiction



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Documentary films often explore unusual formal and stylistic options. We look at films by Wim Wenders and Ben Rivers that mix the two modes in "Ponds and performers: Two experimental documentaries."

films do. William Wyler's World War II-era *Memphis Belle* follows the course of a single raid over Germany, seen largely from inside a B-17 bomber. Eugene Jarecki's *Why We Fight* traces how what President Eisenhower called "the military-industrial complex" achieved greater power over U.S. policies after the 9/11 attacks. On a more intimate level, the portrait documentary *Rivers and Tides* explains how an artist makes his unique natural-landscape sculptures (10.10).

The filmmaker can choose to employ *nonnarrative* types of form as well. The film might be designed to convey categorized information, so we can call this formal patterning **categorical form**. Or the filmmaker may want to make an argument that will convince the spectator of something. In this case, the film draws on **rhetorical form**. Given the attractiveness of stories, narrative principles sometimes mix with these other sorts of form. One section of a categorical or rhetorical documentary may tell a story, thus following principles of chronology and cause-and-effect. In these other types, however, the narrative sections fulfill the larger purpose of exploring a category or building an argument.

As we consider each formal option, we'll analyze one film as a prime example. To get a sense of each film's overall form, we'll break it into segments, as we did with *Citizen Kane* in Chapter 3. Along the way, we'll discuss how particular stylistic choices support the film's large-scale development.

Categorical Form: Introduction

Categories are groupings that individuals or societies create to organize their knowledge of the world. Some categories are based on scientific research, and these often attempt to account exhaustively for all the data in question. For example, scientists have developed an elaborate system to classify every known animal and plant into genus and species.

Most of the categories we use in our daily life are less strict, less neat, and less exhaustive. Ordinarily, for example, we do not sort animals we see by genus and species. We use rough categories such as "pets," "wild animals," "farm animals," and "zoo animals." Such groupings are not clear-cut; at one time or another, some animals might fit into most or all of these categories. Yet they suffice for our usual purposes. Similarly, we may employ ideologically based categories such as distinctions between "primitive" and "advanced" societies. These are groupings that have been developed out of clusters of beliefs, and they may not stand up to scrutiny.

If you're a documentary filmmaker and you want to convey some information about the world to audiences, you can organize the movie around categories. Suppose the Discovery cable television channel hires you to make a film about butterflies. You might organize it according to scientific classification, showing one type of butterfly and giving information about its habits, then showing another, with more information, and so on. Alternatively, a travelogue about Switzerland might offer a sampling of local sights and customs, using more commonsensical categories (mountains, chocolates) that your audience can easily recognize.

Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia*, Part 2, was made in 1936 as a record of the Berlin Olympics. Its basic category is the Games as an event, which Riefenstahl had to condense and arrange into two feature-length films. Within these films, the games are broken down into subcategories—sailing events, sprinting events, and so on. Beyond this, Riefenstahl creates an overall tone, stressing the games' grandeur and the international cooperation implicit in the gathering.

A categorical film often begins by identifying its subject. Our clichéd travelogue might start with a map of Switzerland. Riefenstahl begins *Olympia*'s second



10.10 Narrative documentary. In Nova Scotia, environmental artist Andy Goldsworthy creates a delicate sculpture out of stones and icicles. It will eventually be carried away by the tides.

“To deprive the audience entirely of narrative in a long film is a real risk.”

—Pat O'Neill, experimental filmmaker

part with athletes jogging and then fraternizing in their clubhouse. They aren't identified by the sport each specializes in but are presented simply as participants in the Olympics. Later the individual sequences assign the athletes to various events.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

Engaging Viewers Using Categorical Form

The filmmaker using categorical form tends to use simple patterns of development. The film might move from small to large, local to national, personal to public, and so on. Your film on butterflies, for example, might begin with smaller species and work up to large ones, or it might go from drab to colorful types.

Because categorical form tends to develop in fairly simple ways, it risks boring the spectator. If the progression from segment to segment depends too much on repetition ("And here's another example . . ."), our expectations are too easily satisfied. If you were to make a categorical film, you'd be challenged to introduce variations and make us adjust our expectations.

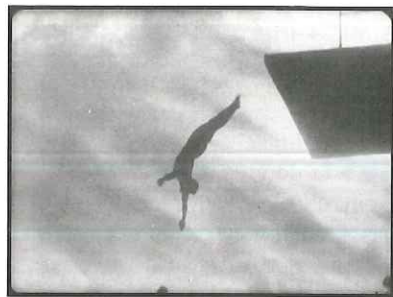
For example, you might choose a category that is exciting or unusual enough to present many ways of stirring the viewer's interest. Riefenstahl realized that the Olympics have an innate drama based on competition and a potential for beauty in the display of physical grace. In *Cinemania*, a portrait documentary, we meet five passionate New York City film lovers who schedule their lives around screenings, sometimes four or five each day. But the film maintains our interest by contrasting its subjects in age, gender, and tastes. What might seem an obsessive lifestyle becomes a small community that accommodates people with varying personalities.

You might also engage a viewer by showing how the category and subcategories connect to broader matters. What designers think about a typeface might seem of pretty narrow interest, but Gary Hustwit made *Helvetica* into an engrossing film. He showed that those who love or hate Helvetica often belong to different generations and hold contrasting views about modern life. For the film that provides our main example, *Gap-Toothed Women*, Les Blank chose an offbeat category that turns out to be broad enough to encompass many sorts of women. As a result, the film's interviews cover a range of varying viewpoints.

Another way in which the filmmaker can maintain our interest across a categorical film is through patterned use of film techniques. Your film about butterflies might concentrate on conveying information about species, but it could also exploit colors and shapes to add abstract visual interest. The diving sequence at the end of *Olympia* is famous for its dazzling succession of images of divers filmed from many angles (10.11), while *Helvetica* seeks out varieties of the typeface in public places, suggesting that it's a pervasive part of the modern city (10.12).

Finally, the categorical film can maintain interest by mixing in other kinds of form. Although overall a film might be organized around categories, it can include small-scale narratives. At one point, *Olympia* singles out track-and-field athlete Glenn Morris and follows him through the stages of his event, because he unexpectedly won the decathlon. Similarly, a filmmaker might try to make an ideological point about the category, injecting a bit of rhetorical form into the film. We'll see that Les Blank hints that treating gapped teeth as a flaw reflects a society's bias about what constitutes beauty.

Categorical form is simple in principle, but it can create surprising effects. In *The Sweetest Sound*, Alan Berliner surveys the category of people's names. He investigates the origins of his name, tracks down other Alan Berliners, and asks strangers how they feel about their names. His compilation of newsreel footage, home movies, interviews, voice-over narration, and sound bites yields some diverting gags ("Every Tom, Dick, and Harry is called John") and neurotic reflections on identity ("Are they better Alan Berliners than I am?").



10.11



10.12

10.11–10.12 Striking visual values in categorical form. Filmed against the sky, the divers at the end of *Olympia*, Part 2 become soaring shapes rather than individual competitors (10.11), while *Helvetica* often presents examples of the typeface straight-on, as if a building were a page in a book (10.12).

“The whole history of movie making has been to portray extraordinary things, and no one has felt that much confidence in looking at life itself and finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.”
—Albert Maysles, documentary filmmaker

An Example of Categorical Form: *Gap-Toothed Women*

Les Blank made modest personal documentaries from the 1960s to his death in 2013. His *Garlic Is as Good as Ten Mothers* captures different people's attitudes toward the popular condiment. Blank employed categorical organization in original ways, showing that this formal approach can be entertaining and thought provoking.

Gap-Toothed Women was conceived, directed, and filmed by Blank, in collaboration with Maureen Gosling (editor), Chris Simon (associate producer), and Susan Kell (assistant director). The film consists largely of brief interviews with women who have spaces between their front teeth. Why make a film on this unusual, maybe inconsequential subject?

The film's organization suggests a larger theme: Sometimes society has rather narrow notions of what counts as beauty. After introducing the category, the film examines social attitudes, both positive and negative, toward gap-toothed women. If gapped teeth seem to be flaws at the beginning of the film, by the end, being gap-toothed is identified with attractiveness, energy, and creativity.

We can break *Gap-Toothed Women* into these segments:

1. A pretitle sequence introducing a few gap-toothed women.
 2. A title segment with a quotation from Chaucer.
 3. Some genetic and cultural explanations for gaps.
 4. Ways American culture stigmatizes gapped teeth, and efforts to correct or adjust to them.
 5. Careers and creativity.
 6. An epilogue: gaps and life.
- C. Credits.

These segments are punctuated with songs, as well as with still images from magazine covers and photographs that comment on the subject matter of the interviews.

The Opening The first image is a startlingly close view of a woman's mouth (10.13) as she recalls baby-sitting for her brothers. Somehow her parents knew when she had stolen bites from forbidden sweets. She has a wide gap between her teeth, and Blank cuts to a close view of an apple, the clue that tipped off her parents (10.14). Blank sets up the film's category humorously, making the tooth gap a wry mark of a woman's individuality. A quick series of closer views of six smiling gap-toothed mouths follows, culminating in a shot of a woman's entire head. All are accompanied by folksy harp music that enhances the cheerful tone.

While quickly establishing the category governing the film, this sequence also sets up a recurring stylistic choice. Usually, documentary talking heads are framed in medium shots or medium close-ups, but Blank also includes many close-ups centering on the subjects' mouths, as in the opening view of gapped teeth (10.13). Blank zooms in on the woman's mouth, and presents the face against a neutral background; both choices reappear often in the film. Once we've learned to notice tooth gaps, we'll concentrate on the speaker's mouth even in the more normally composed head shots (10.15). Later Blank (in one of his few offscreen comments) coaxes an elderly woman to grin more broadly to show off her gap (10.16). As we start to notice the gaps, we register their differences. Some are wide, some narrow, and we're invited to compare them. By a certain point, the speakers no longer mention them, and the filmmakers seem confident that by then we'll pay attention to them as a visual motif.



10.13



10.14

10.13–10.14 The opening. In *Gap-Toothed Women*, a close view of a woman's mouth with a large gap (10.13) leads to the telltale apple—"My signature, which was my teeth marks" (10.14).



10.15



10.16

10.15–10.16 Emphasizing the gaps. “My father has a gap, about as wide as mine is; my mom has a gap that’s a little smaller” (10.15). Later, we strain to see a woman’s gap as she smiles at the camera (10.16).

The second segment switches to slower shots of a woman playing a harp in a garden. The pleasant tone of this opening is echoed at the end by another, more buoyant, musical performance. In between, the film explores its subjects’ attitudes toward being gap toothed.

During the harpist’s performance, the film’s title appears in white longhand (10.17). This writing recalls the initial woman’s reference to her gap-teeth as “my signature.” The title leads to a superimposed epigraph: “‘The Wife of Bath knew much about wandering by the way. She was gap-toothed, to tell the truth.’—Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, 1386 A.D.” This epigraph suggests that the film’s central category originated long ago. Moreover, Chaucer’s Wife of Bath is traditionally associated with erotic playfulness, and this element becomes a motif in the film as a whole.

Gaps: Truth and Myth The film’s third segment deals with where gaps come from and what they are thought to mean. In a cluster of brief interviews, three women mention that other members of their family had gap-teeth as well, so we infer that this feature might be inherited genetically. All three women speak in a neutral way about gapped teeth, but the first, mentioning that her mother had worn braces, drops the hint that some people take gapped teeth to be undesirable.

This segment then shifts its focus to consider how various cultures—specifically, non-white societies—have interpreted gap-teeth. A young Asian woman with a gap speculates on a “stupid” myth that gap toothed women “are supposed to be sexier.” Blank then cuts to a brief clip from the fiction film *Swann in Love*, with the protagonist making love to a beautiful gap-toothed woman in a carriage. Does this confirm the myth? Or only suggest that the myth has been applied to gap-toothed women in general, since the actress is not Asian? This clip from another film introduces Blank’s tactic of intercutting images from art and popular culture with the interview footage. This other material tests the comments and reminds us of how pervasive the image of the gap-toothed woman is.

The erotic motif brings back the Wife of Bath, now in an engraving showing her riding at the head of a group of pilgrims (10.18). A scholarly male voice-over explains that in medieval times being gap toothed was associated with a love of travel and an amorous nature. There follows a string of interviews developing positive interpretations of the motif. A gap-toothed woman explains, in sign language, that she dreamed of kissing her instructor and having their gaps interlock. An African-American woman describes how, in places like Senegal, gaps are seen as lucky or beautiful (10.19). An Indian woman asserts that in her culture gaps are so normal as not to require comment. Abruptly, Blank cuts to a modern copy of a sphinx, and we hear a woman’s voice claiming that ancient Egyptian women



10.17



10.18



10.19

10.17–10.19 Gaps and femininity. The film’s title is superimposed on a garden scene (10.17). The image of the Wife of Bath stands out incongruously from the dignified group, with her low-cut dress and broad grin (10.18). Blank follows this with imagery from cultures in which gaps are valued (10.19).

believed that gaps were associated with beautiful singing. Overall, the segment shows that most cultures don’t consider gap-teeth to be flaws, and many treat them as signs of beauty.

Segment 4 tries to show that, in contrast to these cultures, modern Western society stigmatizes gaps. Several more interviews, intercut with other material, show that women have felt that their own teeth were unattractive. One tells of a dentist who tried to convince her to fix her gap (mocked in a song about “filling your mouth with wires, your head with lies”). But the idea that gapped teeth are ugly is immediately counterbalanced by vigorous editing. Two magazine images of models without gaps are followed by a pretty little African-American girl with a gap; then a photo of Madonna, a gap-toothed glamour icon; and then a *Vogue* cover (10.20). As if in reply to these images, a woman says she’s worried about her height and weight, as well as her teeth, although she herself is conventionally attractive (10.21). Her comment is then countered by other opinions, as one woman talks about how in magazines “you never see a person with gapped teeth,” and a mother with a gap-toothed toddler recalls that she had hated her own teeth until Lauren Hutton became a successful model. By intercutting the woman’s comments with illustrations of what she mentions (10.22–10.25), Blank achieves an intellectual comparison somewhat akin to Sergei Eisenstein’s intellectual montage (pp. 259–262). Overall, the editing drives home conflicting attitudes toward what is beautiful.

These interviews have been less playful than the opening sequence, but now the film lightens again. In an amusing sequence, Lauren Hutton herself roams through city streets in a vain attempt to find gap-toothed people to interview (10.26). Hutton is then interviewed in her home, saying that if a person finds herself attractive on the inside, she can be satisfied with her appearance.

The same playfulness is sustained in another musical interlude, folk singer Claudia Schmidt’s “I’m a Little Cookie,” a song accompanied by 10 photos of gap-toothed girls and teenagers, all smiling. This segues into a series of testimonies



10.20



10.21



10.22



10.23



10.24



10.25

10.20–10.25 Western attitudes toward gaps. Images from popular culture reveal attitudes: Les Blank shows Lauren Hutton, the first major gap-toothed fashion model (10.20). By contrast, a beautiful woman worries that her gap makes her unattractive (10.21). Another young woman recalls being teased and compared to Howdy Doody (10.22–10.23). This comparison is followed by a shot of the woman praising Lauren Hutton (10.24), which leads to a glamorous cover photo of Hutton revealing her gap (10.25; compare 10.20).



10.26



10.27

10.26–10.27 Satirizing the media. In an echo of traditional documentary, Blank uses a TV-style handheld camera to follow Lauren Hutton's search for gap-toothed women (10.26). Later Blank includes a fake commercial demonstrating a device designed to fill in gaps (10.27).

about how women have tried to correct their teeth with homemade devices, followed by a mock commercial for an actual device designed to fill in gaps (10.27). This segment of the film ends with the interview with the elderly woman who is proud to still have her own teeth, gap and all (10.16).

Women Glorifying in the Gap Segment 5, which we've labeled "Careers and Creativity," begins with another Schmidt song about gaps. As we see images of more gap-toothed women, including Whoopi Goldberg, the song reintroduces the Wife of Bath motif ("old Chaucer knew where the score was at") and leads into an interview with Schmidt herself. She recalls that she used to be defiant about having a gap and extolled "gap power." There follows an interview with the cartoonist Dori Seda, standing beside a poster for the film we're watching and explaining that recognizing her gap helped her link herself to a tradition of unusual women (10.28). The film is moving toward associating gapped teeth with pride, comradeship, and creativity.

The next string of interviews reinforces this theme—oddly, by not mentioning gapped teeth at all. The emphasis now falls on women's activities (10.29). The Indian woman seen earlier draws rice-paint patterns on her forehead; a Hispanic woman trucker describes a long, difficult trip through a storm. The editing contrasts these stories with one, told by Catherine de Santis, about Arab women who remove body hair with a hot-wax concoction. This tale recalls the theme that it can be dangerous to conform to external standards of beauty.

More positive instances follow, as a heavy-metal singer explains that she quit her band because of its violent messages, and a gap-toothed woman displays the symbols for "woman" and "peace" painted on her face. A sudden sound bridge plays a dual role here. Over the woman's face, we hear a chorus singing, "They'll be marching, marching, marching when the Army comes to town," as if referring to her antiwar slogans. A cut to a new sequence reveals the music to be diegetic, played by a Salvation Army band before a speech is given by Sandra Day O'Connor (10.30).

Why is this Supreme Court Justice in the movie? For one thing, she's gap toothed. For another, her speech emphasizes "creativity, work, and love" as things that make life worthwhile. Since we've just seen several working and creative women, the thematic connection becomes stronger.

The Epilogue O'Connor also says that when creativity is gone, "the will to live seems to go with it." Her remark leads to the final summarizing segment of the film. In a tight shot, a woman's midriff gyrates in a belly dance. We glimpse other costumed women looking on and musicians accompanying the dancer. The dancer's voice-over commentary explains that she is in remission from acute cancer. A cut moves us to a quiet interview with her, identified as Sharlyn Sawyer,



10.28



10.29



10.30

10.28–10.30 Gaps and creative energy. Cartoonist Dori Seda discusses active women (10.28). A sculptor talks of how her work helps communities (10.29). Sandra Day O'Connor extols "creativity, work, and love" (10.30).

in everyday clothes against a simple board fence. After facing death, she explains, physical flaws no longer bother her. "You get stepped on by a horse, fine, you know, you've got a scar on your leg. Oh, well, you know, you've got a gap between your teeth, hey, no problem!" To underscore the comment, the film freezes on her cheerful face (10.31). Sawyer's spontaneity and commonsense acceptance of physical flaws and aging help put the anxieties of some of the earlier women in perspective.

Another sound bridge—this time, applause that seems to approve of what Sawyer has said—takes us back to the Middle Eastern dance class, where Sawyer performs another lively dance (10.32). The credits begin to roll, revealing a very close photo of a smiling gap-toothed mouth, an image that echoes the first shot. A final acknowledgment maintains the film's exuberant tone: "Many thanks to all the wonderful Gap-Toothed women who made this film possible!"

Categorical Form and Interpretation *Gap-Toothed Women* shows that category-based form need not be a dry recitation of similarities and differences. A filmmaker choosing this method of organizing can take a stance on a subject, play off contrasting attitudes, and entertain an audience. By choosing an unusual category and using simple but vivid film techniques, Blank and his collaborators have created a light film with a serious point.

The filmmakers also show that categorical form can operate on the four levels of meaning that we described in Chapter 2 (pp. 58–61). On the referential level, *Gap-Toothed Women* presents a series of gap-toothed women from different races and different cultural and class backgrounds. We may know some of their faces and names from previous experience (Madonna and Whoopi Goldberg most obviously, Claudia Schmidt and Dori Seda to fans of folk music and underground comics). We also know that *Vogue* is a fashion magazine and assume that the magazines with Russian or other foreign writing are those countries' equivalents of *Vogue*.

Moving to the level of explicit meaning, the interviewees display a range of reactions to gapped teeth. Some are obviously proud, some embarrassed, others more ambivalent. Some express quite directly the idea that mass media often stigmatize people with gaps, while others reveal that gaps are admired in some cultures. At one point, the sculptor compares the lack of gap-toothed models in magazines to the notion of black people seeing only white faces in media images. This explicitly links stereotyped attitudes about feminine beauty to racism. In most cases, the filmmakers' voices are not heard; they let their interviewees make these points.

The film's form is not organized as an explicit argument in favor of gap-teeth being a natural, even attractive, trait. Yet on the level of implicit meaning, the music and photographs of smiling, gap-toothed women tend to suggest that. The choice of beautiful women who are worried about their gaps cues us to interpret their fears as unnecessary. Certain women's comments signal the ideas that the filmmakers wish to convey. Dori Seda's discussion of how important it is for women to do things helps define the film's segment on careers and creativity, and the cancer survivor's speech at the end makes anxieties about gapped teeth trivial in relation to the potential joys of life.

Beyond these three levels of meaning, we can also discern symptomatic meanings. Blank began making films in the 1960s, when a counterculture based on distrust of authority emerged. More specifically, it was an era of women's liberation, with its demands for gender equality and the breaking down of feminine stereotypes. By 1987, when Blank's film appeared, the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s had waned, but many people preserved its ideals. Several of the women interviewed in Blank's film share this sensibility. Moreover, one legacy of the counterculture has been widespread attention paid to society's pressures on women to conform to limiting ideals of beauty. *Gap-Toothed Women* could be interpreted as an example of how radical attitudes of the 1960s slipped into the mainstream—a situation that persists and makes Blank's 1987 film still relevant today.



10.31



10.32

10.31–10.32 Putting gaps in perspective. The frame freezes on a leukemia survivor's gap-toothed smile, underscoring the fact that in the larger scheme of things, gaps are insignificant (10.31). Soon she is leaping and spinning to great applause (10.32).

Rhetorical Form: Introduction

Another type of documentary film uses *rhetorical* form, in which the filmmaker presents a persuasive argument. The goal in such a film is to persuade the audience to adopt an opinion about the subject matter and perhaps to act on that opinion. This type of film goes beyond the categorical type in that it tries to make an explicit argument.

Rhetorical form is common in all the media, most obviously in televised political speeches. We encounter rhetoric in daily life too, whenever people try to persuade each other. Salespeople try to get you to buy something, and over lunch you may try to convince a skeptical friend of the virtues of a band or athlete you like. Television bombards us with one of the most pervasive uses of rhetorical form in film—commercials, which try to compel viewers to buy products or vote for candidates.

Factors in Rhetorical Form We can define rhetorical form in film by four basic attributes. First, it addresses the viewer openly, trying to move him or her to a new intellectual conviction, to a new emotional attitude, or to action.

Second, the subject of the film is usually not an issue of scientific truth but a matter of opinion, an issue you can take many plausible attitudes toward. The filmmaker tries to make the particular position convincing by presenting different types of arguments and evidence. Because rhetorical films deal with beliefs and arguments, they involve the expression of ideology; indeed, perhaps no type of film form centers so consistently on explicit meaning and ideological implications.

A third aspect of rhetorical form follows from the emphasis on opinion. If the conclusion cannot be proved beyond question, the filmmaker often appeals to our emotions, rather than presenting only factual evidence. And fourth, the film often attempts to persuade the viewer to make a choice. That may be big or small, but rhetorical form asks you to take a side, and perhaps take action. Which shampoo to buy? What candidate to vote for? Should my country go to war?

Types of Rhetorical Argument Filmmakers can use all sorts of arguments to shape our choices. Often, however, they don't present these arguments *as* arguments. A rhetorical film frequently presents arguments as if they were simply observations or factual conclusions. Nor does the film tend to point out other opinions. The filmmaker using rhetorical form tries to get the audience to accept debatable arguments as plausible on their face. The arguments we encounter may relate to the source, to the subject, and to the viewer.

Arguments from Source Some of the film's arguments will rely on what are taken to be reliable sources of information. The film may present firsthand accounts of events, expert testimony at a hearing, or interviews with people assumed to be knowledgeable. Most political documentaries include talking-head footage of investigators, scholars, or insiders. At the same time, the filmmakers will try to show that they themselves are well informed and trustworthy. They may insert themselves into the interview situation, as Michael Moore does in his documentaries, or they may use a voice-over narrator speaking in tones of crisp conviction.

Subject-Centered Arguments The film also employs arguments about its subject matter. Sometimes the film appeals to beliefs common at the time in a given culture. For example, many contemporary Americans suspect that most politicians are cynical and corrupt. Accordingly, a candidate may invoke that belief and tell potential voters that he or she will bring a new honesty to government.

Typically, a subject-centered approach relies on *evidence* to support the film's argument. Evidence could consist of statistics, research findings, poll results,

eyewitness testimony, expert judgment, and the like—the sort of evidence you would use in a research paper. But often the documentarist will select vivid examples that stand in for a body of data. Instead of a poll chart showing citizens' resistance to going to war, you the filmmaker might supply shots of a demonstration, with placards and footage of speakers. This footage is more vivid than a chart, but it may suggest that the demonstrators' position is widely held, even if it's a minority view. In other words, evidence may be more or less strong, and dramatic examples may not be typical of wider trends.

Further, filmmakers can back up an argument by exploiting familiar, easily accepted argumentative patterns. Students of rhetoric call such patterns *enthymemes*, arguments that rely on widespread opinion and usually conceal some crucial assumptions. "He must favor low taxes. After all, he's a millionaire" is a common political claim. The implicit argument runs: *He's a millionaire; all millionaires favor low taxes; he must favor low taxes.* But the middle premise is questionable. There are many millionaires and billionaires who claim that out of a sense of social obligation they would support raising tax rates.

Enthymemes allow an easy but slippery movement from problems to a solution. Suppose you're making a film about your city's problem with graffiti. You find that in some cities, after strict vandalism laws were enacted, the incidents of tagging dropped. So you could argue that stiffer punishment is the best solution for your town. This sort of inference is so familiar that we tend to accept it as reasonable. But in this case you'd be assuming that your town is like the other cities in respects that are relevant to graffiti. That might not be true. In some cities, tagging is a casual pastime that could be cut by stronger penalties. In other cities, it's a strong tradition among youth gangs and artistic subcultures and resists policing. At the same time, the stiffer-punishment solution that your film proposes might overlook other solutions, such as providing approved areas for graffiti. (In some cities graffiti zones have become tourist attractions.)

Often the problem-then-solution enthymeme isn't as well justified as we'd like to think. Solutions to human problems are hard, and sometimes we're not sure why certain policies have succeeded or failed. It's easy to assume that solutions fit problems perfectly. Shortly, we'll see taken-for-granted enthymematic patterns at work in *The River*.

Viewer-Centered Arguments Beyond appeals to authority and subject-centered appeals like enthymemes, the film may make an argument that taps into the emotions of the viewer. Politicians seek out photo ops that show them with flag, family, and ordinary folks. Appeals to patriotism, family sentiments, and other emotions are common in rhetorical films. Sometimes emotional appeals can disguise the weakness of other arguments of the film.

A viewer-centered appeal need not be heavy handed. *Darwin's Nightmare* argues that Lake Victoria in Tanzania exemplifies basic problems facing Africa as a whole. The area has been colonized by an industry that impoverishes the locals, and it is a prime drop-off point for armaments that fuel civil wars. But the film's point is not introduced explicitly. Instead, we get vignettes showing a wasp being swatted, mysterious men getting off planes and carousing with local women, looming shots of giant fish, images of desolate poverty, and scenes of street musicians and brawling youths. This opening relies on unusual viewer-centered appeals. It arouses curiosity about how all these disparate elements will coalesce into an overall argument. The problem at the core of *Darwin's Nightmare* emerges gradually from the evidence that the filmmaker accumulates after whetting our interest with vivid, perplexing scenes.

If you were to make a rhetorical documentary about a problem, you could organize the types of argumentative appeals in various ways. You could start by introducing the problem explicitly, perhaps dramatizing it with strong emotion. Then you could review some supporting evidence before proposing a solution. You

might end your film with a scene that bathes the solution in an affirmative tone. *The River*, our main example of rhetorical form, adheres to this pattern.

An Example of Rhetorical Form: *The River*

Pare Lorentz made *The River* for the U.S. government's Farm Security Administration. In 1937, the country was making progress toward pulling out of the Great Depression. Under the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the federal government used its powers to create public works programs. These programs sought to provide jobs for thousands of unemployed workers, as well as to correct various social problems. Although many people tend now to think of Roosevelt's policies as the right ones and to credit him with bringing America out of the Depression, he faced strong political opposition at the time.

The River hails the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) as the solution to the region's problems of flooding, agricultural depletion, and non-electrification. The argument had a definite ideological slant: It sought to promote Roosevelt's controversial policies. Let's look at how this film sets out to persuade its audience that the TVA is a good program.

The River can be broken into 11 segments.

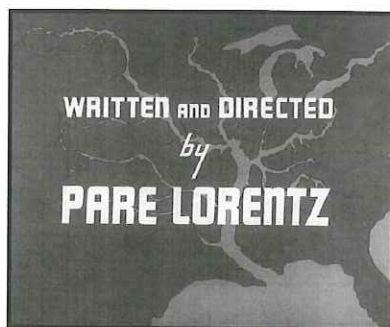
C. Credits.

1. A prologue title setting forth the subject of the film.
 2. A description of the rivers that flow into the Mississippi and then into the Gulf of Mexico.
 3. A history of the early agricultural use of the river.
 4. The problems caused in the South by the Civil War.
 5. A section on lumbering and steel mills in the North, and the building of urban areas.
 6. The floods caused by careless exploitation of the land.
 7. The current effects of these cumulative problems on people: poverty and ignorance.
 8. A map and description of the TVA project.
 9. The dams of the TVA and the benefits they bring.
- #### E. An end title.

At first the film seems merely to be giving us information about the Mississippi. It proceeds for quite a while before its argument becomes apparent. Slowly, by careful repetition, variation, and development, Lorentz builds up a case that depends on all the segments working together.

Prelude and Premises The opening credits of the film appear over an old-fashioned picture of steamboats on the Mississippi and then over a map of the United States (10.33). The film immediately suggests to the audience that its makers are reliable and knowledgeable and that it is based on historical and geographical facts. The same map returns under the prologue in the brief opening segment, which states: "This is the story of a river." Such a statement disguises the rhetorical purpose of the film, implying that the film will be an objectively told story, drawing on narrative form.

Segment 2 continues the introduction with shots of the sky, mountains, and rivers. This motif of the majestic beauty of the Mississippi valley will be repeated at the start of later sections and then contrasted with the bleak landscapes that dominate the middle parts of the film. As we see the beauty of the river (10.34), a resonant male voice tells us how water flows into the Mississippi from as far away as Idaho and Pennsylvania. The narrator's rich voice accords with conventional



10.33



10.34

10.33–10.34 Winning the viewer's trust. While we hear a resonant, assuring voice-over narrator, *The River* shows the Mississippi River and its tributaries exaggerated in size (10.33). Soon we have an idyllic image of nature (10.34).

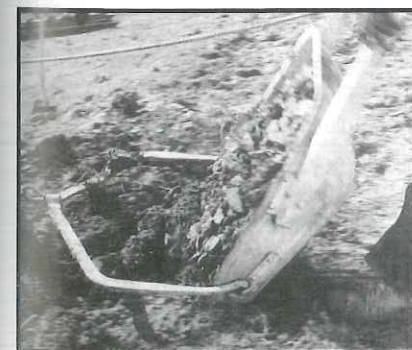
notions of a trustworthy person. The narrator, Thomas Chalmers, was an opera baritone whose voice resonates with calm assurance.

Lorentz uses the sound track to arouse emotion. While we see rivers swelling as they join, the narrator's commentary avoids the dry, factual tone of most documentaries. The sentences rush in an urgent rhythm: "Down the Yellowstone, the Milk, the White, and Cheyenne . . . the Cannonball, the Musselshell, the James, and the Sioux." This famous roll call of the rivers, recalling the teeming catalogues of Walt Whitman's poetry, evokes the power and the grandeur of the Mississippi valley. No less emotional is the spacious folk-song score composed by Virgil Thomson. The film identifies itself with American tradition, appealing to the viewer's patriotic sentiments and implying that the whole country should face up to a regional problem.

The River in History Segment 2 has established an idyllic situation, with its beautiful images of mountain and river landscapes. The overall development of the film is toward a restoration of this beauty, but with a difference. Segment 3 begins to fit the Mississippi into one version of American history.

The new section begins much as segment 2 did, with a view of clouds. But now, instead of the mountains we saw earlier, we see mule teams and drivers. Again the narrator launches a list: "New Orleans to Baton Rouge . . . Baton Rouge to Natchez . . . Natchez to Vicksburg." The narrator tells of the dikes built along the Mississippi to control flooding in pre-Civil War days. The facts and dates he provides present him as a credible source, trustworthy and knowledgeable. We see cotton bales loaded onto steamboats, giving a sense of the country's early strength as an exporter of goods. The brisk cutting here, as elsewhere in the film, evokes American enterprise and energy. Graphic discontinuities suggest both change and continuity (10.35, 10.36). Dynamic compositions suggest the exhilaration of a growing nation (10.37).

In segments 1–3, Lorentz has seemed simply to be telling a story of the river. But in segment 4, the film begins to introduce the problems that the TVA will eventually solve. Bleak images show the results of the Civil War: destroyed houses, the land worn out by the cultivation of cotton, and people forced to move west. The tone of concern becomes apparent, and it appeals to emotion. Over images of impoverished people, somber music plays. It is based on a familiar folk tune, "Go Tell Aunt Rhody," which, with its line "The old gray goose is dead," underscores the farmers' losses. The narrator's voice expresses compassion as he speaks of the South's "tragedy of land impoverished." This attitude of sympathy may incline us to accept as true other things that the film tells us. The narrator also refers to the



10.35



10.36

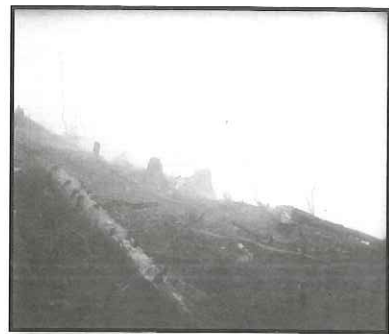


10.37

10.35–10.37 Dynamic visuals present energetic growth. Lorentz uses graphic contrast in cutting from a mud-filled sledge (10.35) to a plow thrusting in the opposite direction (10.36). The clashing movements suggest a shift in technology, but their similarities suggest a connection between building a dike and farming cotton. Later, a canted framing shows workers loading cotton bales onto a steamboat (10.37). The composition, accompanied by sprightly banjo music, makes the bales seem to roll downhill almost effortlessly.



10.38



10.39

10.38–10.39 Before and after. *The River* returns to the motifs of pines and clouds seen in the beginning (10.38), but soon the pines become stumps, the clouds an ominous fog (10.39).

people of the period as “we”: “We mined the soil for cotton until it would yield no more.” Here the film’s persuasive intent becomes evident. It was not literally *we*—you and I and the narrator—who grew this cotton. The use of *we* is a rhetorical strategy to make us feel that all Americans share a responsibility for this problem and for finding a solution.

The narrator resumes his story, moving outside the impoverished South to arouse our pride in the growth of other regions. In segment 5, poetically repetitious narration describes the lumber industry’s growth after the Civil War, listing “black spruce and Norway pine” and other trees. In the images, we see evergreens against the sky, echoing the cloud motif that opened segments 2 and 3 (10.38). This creates a parallel between the riches of the agricultural areas and the industrial ones. A sprightly sequence of logging, accompanied by music based on the tune “Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,” again gives us a sense of America’s vigor. A section on coal mining and steel mills follows, enhancing this impression. This segment ends with references to the growing urban centers: “We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns,” and a roll call invokes many of their names.

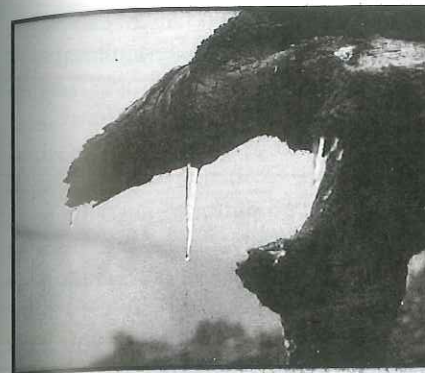
Up to this point, we have seen the strengths of America associated with the river valley, with just a hint of problems that growth has sparked. But segment 6 switches tactics and creates a lengthy series of contrasts to the earlier parts. It begins with the same list of trees—“black spruce and Norway pine”—but now, instead of seeing trees against clouds, we see stumps against fog (10.39). Another line returns, but with a new phrase added: “We built a hundred cities and a thousand towns . . . but at what a cost.” Beginning with the barren hilltops, we are shown how melting ice runs off, and how the runoff gradually erodes hillsides and swells rivers into torrential floods. Once more we hear the list of rivers from segment 2, but now the music is somber and the rivers are no longer idyllic. Again we get a parallel, this time between the soil erosion here and the soil depletion in the South after the Civil War.

Style Arousing Emotion It’s worth pausing to comment on Lorentz’s use of film style, because he reinforces the film’s argument through techniques that arouse the audience’s emotions. The contrast of segment 6 with the lively logging segment that precedes it could hardly be stronger. The sequence begins with lingering shots of the fog-shrouded stumps (10.39). There is little movement. The music consists of threatening, pulsing chords. The narrator speaks more deliberately. Dissolves, rather than straight cuts, connect the shots. The segment slowly builds up tension. One shot shows a stump draped with icicles, and an abrupt cut-in emphasizes the steady drip from them (10.40). A sudden, highly dissonant chord signals us to expect danger.

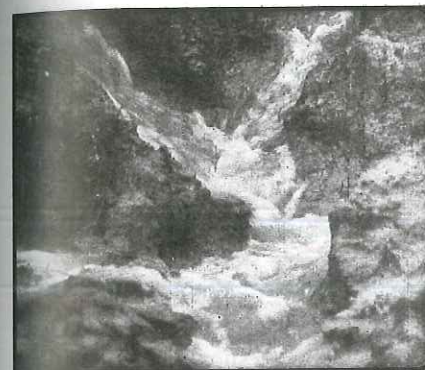
Then, in a series of close-ups of the earth, water gathers, first in trickles, then in streams washing the soil away. By now the music presents soft, tom-tom-like beats punctuating a plaintive and rising orchestral melody. As the narrator intones dates, we see streams turning into creeks, and creeks into waterfalls, and eventually rivers overflowing their banks (10.41–10.43). Lorentz uses rhythmic editing and music to sweep us along with the mounting tragedy.

As the flooding intensifies, brief shots of lightning bolts are intercut with shots of raging water. The dramatic musical score is overwhelmed by sirens and whistles. From a situation of natural beauty, the film has taken us to a disaster for which humans were responsible. Lorentz’s stylistic choices have blended to convey a sense of rising tension, convincing us of the flood’s menace. The film’s overall argument becomes more compelling because we’re made to grasp that threat emotionally as well as factually. Throughout *The River*, voice, music, editing, and movement within the shot combine to create a rhythm for such rhetorical purposes.

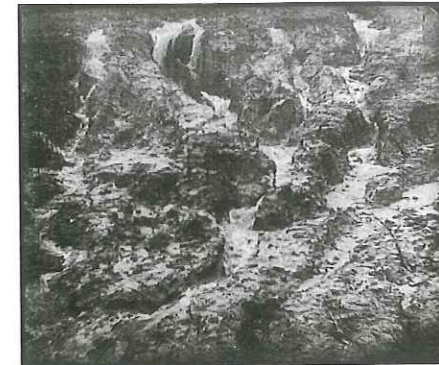
By this point, we understand the problems of flooding and erosion that the film is presenting. Still, the film withholds the solution and presents the effects



10.40



10.42



10.41



10.43

10.40–10.43 Editing and music create a flood. In *The River*, shots of icicles dripping lead to a segment on erosion (10.40). Streams form, and as they grow out of control, the narrator begins supplying dates, each time more urgently insistent: “Nineteen-seven” (10.41), “Nineteen-thirteen” (10.42), “Nineteen-sixteen” (10.43), and on up to 1937.

of the floods on people’s lives in contemporary America. Segment 7 describes government aid to flood victims in 1937 but points out that the basic problem remains. The narrator employs a striking enthymeme here: “And poor land makes poor people—poor people make poor land.” This sounds reasonable on the surface, but how did the poor people deplete the land? Didn’t the southern plantation owners whose ruined mansions we saw in segment 4 have a lot to do with the impoverishment of the soil? Such statements are employed more for their poetic neatness and emotional appeal than for any rigorous reasoning they may contain. Scenes of tenant farmer families appeal directly to our emotional response to such poverty (10.44). This segment picks up on motifs introduced in segment 4, on the Civil War. Now, the film tells us, these people cannot go west, because there is no more open land there.

Solving the Problem The core problem has been introduced and discussed, and emotional appeals have prepared the audience to accept a solution. Segment 8 presents that solution and begins the part of the film devoted to the proofs that this solution is an effective one.

In segment 8, the map of the opening titles returns, and the narrator becomes analytical. “There is no such thing as an ideal river in nature, but the Mississippi River is out of joint.” Here we have another example of an enthymeme—an inference assumed to be logically valid and factually accurate. The Mississippi may be “out of joint” for certain uses, but would it be out of joint for the animals and plants in its ecosystem? This statement assumes that an “ideal” river would be one perfectly suited to *our* needs and purposes. The narrator goes on to give the film’s most clear-cut statement of its argument: “The old River *can* be controlled. We had the power to take the Valley apart. We have the power to put it together again.”



10.44 The human cost. After delineating the environmental dangers, Lorentz gives them a human face.



10.45



10.46

10.45–10.46 Problem solved. The idyllic imagery of the beginning returns, but now the lakes are human-made (10.45). The new economy of the Valley allows men to work again, heroically framed in low angle against the sky (10.46).

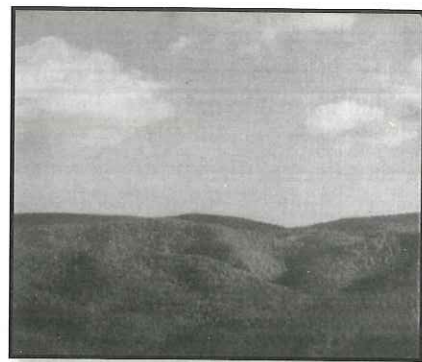
Now we can see why the film's form has been organized as it has. In early segments, especially 3 and 5, we saw how America developed great agricultural and industrial strength. At the time, we might have taken these events as simple facts of history. But now they turn out to be crucial to the film's argument. We have seen that the American people have the power to build and to destroy; therefore, they have the power to build again.

The narrator continues: "In 1933 we started . . .," going on to describe how Congress formed the Tennessee Valley Authority, an agency tasked with restoring the region. This segment presents the TVA as an already settled solution to the problem and offers no alternative solutions. Although the TVA was very controversial, it's presented as a matter of straightforward implementation. Nor does *The River* show the dislocations caused by the building of the dams. There is no mention of the 15,000 people who had to leave their homes and be resettled elsewhere. Nor does the film attempt to rebut the alternative proposals that arose at the time. In all, the solution that was adopted is assumed to be the inevitable one, without risks or drawbacks.

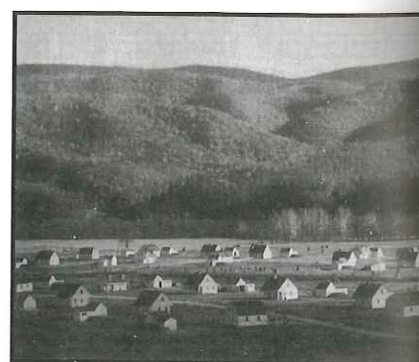
Segment 9 introduces features that recall several earlier parts, but with an emphasis on the future rather than the past. It begins with a list of dams, which we see in progress or finished. This echoes the lists of rivers, trees, towns, and so on that we have heard at intervals. The serene shots of the artificial lakes that follow link the ending to the beginning, recalling the lyrical river shots of segment 2 (10.45). The flooded-out and unemployed people from segment 6 seem now to be happily marching to work (10.46), building planned model towns on government loans. Electricity generated by the dams links these rural communities to those "hundred cities and thousand towns" we heard about earlier, bringing to the countryside "the advantages of urban life." Many motifs planted in a simple fashion are now picked up and woven together to act as proofs of the TVA's benefits.

Nature and Humans in Harmony The ending shows life as being parallel to the way it was in the beginning—beautiful nature, productive people—but enhanced by modern government planning. The film's middle segments have denied us the picturesque views of mountains and sky we saw at the beginning. But after the introduction of the TVA, such shots return (10.47, 10.48). Tying the ending back to the beginning, the imagery shows a return to idyllic nature, under the auspices of government planning.

An upswell of music and a series of images of the dams and rushing water create a brief epilogue summarizing the force that has wrought the change—the TVA. Under the ending titles and credits, we see the U.S. map again. A list tells us



10.47



10.48

10.47–10.48 Nature regained. The hillsides celebrated in the beginning now shelter modern, model towns.

the names of the various government agencies that sponsored the film or assisted in its making. These again seem to lend authority to the source of the arguments in the film.

The River achieved its purpose. Favorable initial response led a major American studio, Paramount, to agree to distribute the film to theaters, a rare opportunity for a government-sponsored short documentary at that time. Reviewers and public alike greeted the film enthusiastically. A contemporary critic's review testifies to the power of the film's rhetorical form. After describing the early portions, Gilbert Seldes wrote: "And so, without you knowing it, you arrive at the Tennessee Valley—and if this is propaganda, make the most of it, because it is masterly. It is as if the pictures which Mr. Lorentz took arranged themselves in such an order that they supplied their own argument, not as if an argument conceived in advance dictated the order of the pictures."

President Roosevelt was pleased with *The River*. He helped get congressional support to start a separate government agency, the U.S. Film Service, to make other documentaries like it. But not everyone was in favor of Roosevelt's policies or believed that the government should set itself up to make films that espoused the views of the current administration. By 1940, the Congress had taken away the U.S. Film Service's funding, and documentary films were once again made only within other government agencies. In such ways, rhetorical form can lead both to direct action and to controversy.

Experimental Film

Another basic type of filmmaking is willfully nonconformist. Some filmmakers challenge normal notions of what a movie can show and how it can show it. These filmmakers work independently of commercial production, distribution, and exhibition, and often they work alone. Their films are hard to classify, but usually they are called *experimental* or *avant-garde*.

Experimental films are made for many reasons. The filmmaker may wish to express personal experiences or viewpoints in ways that would seem eccentric in a mainstream context. In *Mass for the Dakota Sioux*, Bruce Baillie suggests his despair at the failure of America's optimistic vision of history. Su Friedrich's *Damned If You Don't*, a story of a nun who discovers her sexuality, presents the theme of release from religious commitment. Alternatively, the filmmaker may seek to convey a mood or a physical quality (10.49, 10.50).

The filmmaker may also wish to explore some possibilities of the medium itself. Experimental filmmakers have tinkered with cinema in myriad ways. They have presented cosmic allegories, such as Stan Brakhage's *Dog Star Man*, and highly private japes, as in Ken Jacobs's *Little Stabs at Happiness*. Robert Breer's *Fist Fight* experiments with shots only one or two frames long (6.141); by contrast, the shots in Andy Warhol's *Eat* last until the camera runs out of film. You can make an experimental film through improvisation, or a mathematical plan, or just letting nature take its course. For *Eiga-zuke (Pickled Film)*, Japanese-American Sean Morijiro Sunada O'Gara applied pickling agents to negative film and then handprinted the blotchy abstractions onto positive stock.

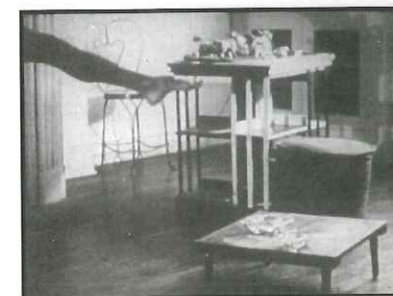
The experimental filmmaker may tell no story, creating poetic reveries (10.51) or pulsating visual collages such as *Ballet mécanique*, which serves as one of our main examples here. Alternatively, the filmmaker may create a fictional story, but it's likely to challenge the viewer. Yvonne Rainer's *Film About a Woman Who . . .* presents its narrative partly through a series of slides that a group of men and women are watching. At the same time, on the sound track, we hear anonymous voices carrying on a conversation, but we cannot confidently assign any voice to an individual onscreen. Rainer thus forces us to weigh everything we see and hear on its own terms, apart from any involvement with characters (10.52).

“One of the things that goes on in *Critical Mass* (this is also true of much of the rest of my work and of the work by others I admire) is a process of training the spectator to watch the film.”

—Hollis Frampton, experimental filmmaker

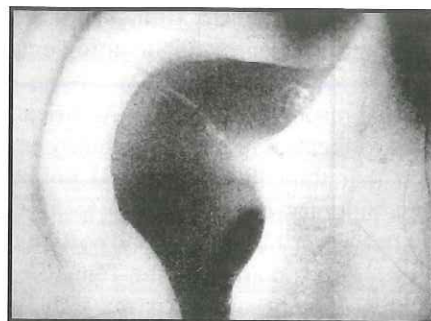


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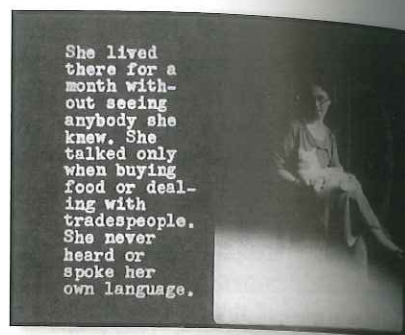
10.50

10.49–10.50 Kinetic grace in the experimental film. Maya Deren's *Choreography for Camera* shows a dancer lifting his leg in a forest (10.49) and bringing it down in a studio (10.50). The match on action yields smooth movement across different times and places.

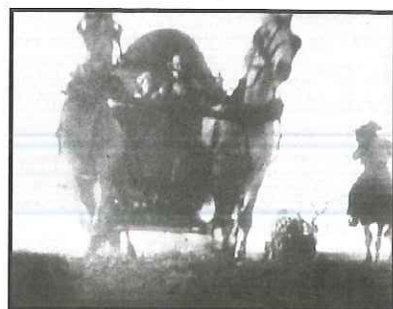


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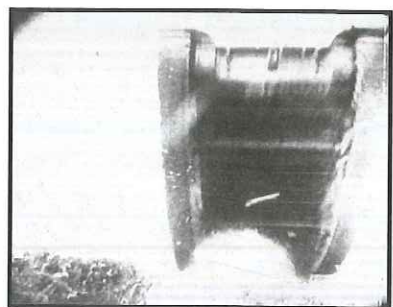
10.51–10.52 Nonnarrative and narrative form in experimental film. In Willard Maas's *Geography of the Body*, an ear creates an abstract, lyrical composition (10.51). Thanks to Rainer's combination of images, sounds, and captions in *Film About a Woman Who . . .*, the viewer is encouraged to imagine several possible stories (10.52).



10.52



10.53



10.54

10.53–10.54 The found-footage film. *A Movie* cuts from a low-angle shot of a stagecoach (10.53) to a similar one of a hurtling tank (10.54), mixing staged footage and newsreel footage to create a graphic match.

A Range of Technical Choices

Any sort of footage may be used for an avant-garde film. Images that a documentarist might take as fragments of actuality can be mobilized for quite different purposes. For the aptly titled *A Movie*, Bruce Conner pulls footage from Hollywood Westerns, travelogues, and newsreels to create a sweeping image of the destruction of civilization (10.53–10.54). Within the experimental mode, such scavenged works are often called *found-footage films*. Found-footage films rely on editing, but experimentalists have also expressed distinct feelings or ideas through staging (10.55, 10.56). There is avant-garde animation as well, as we'll see later in this chapter.

The freedom available to experimental film is on flamboyant display in Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*. Anger takes as his subject the motorcycle culture of the 1960s, and he includes scenes of bikers working on their machines, dressing, partying, and racing. Alongside footage of bikers glimpsed on the streets or in parties, there are many staged incidents—chiefly around Scorpio, a James Dean–like figure. Anger also cuts in still photos, comic strips, found footage from old movies, and Nazi posters. In addition, each segment is accompanied by a rock-and-roll song that adds an ironic or ominous tone to the images (10.57). Throughout the film, Anger links biking to a death wish. *Scorpio Rising* creates elusive but powerful associations, suggesting homoerotic aspects of bike culture, comparing its rituals to fascism and Christianity, and evoking the possibility that people often model their behavior on images supplied by mass media.



10.55



10.56

10.55–10.56 Staging in experimental film. James Broughton's *Mother's Day* offers carefully composed arrays of adults playing children's games (10.55). By superimposing different phases of a kitchen scene, Ivan Galeta's *Two Times in One Space* creates cycles of people splitting or drifting like phantoms (10.56). Mysteriously, the action on the distant balcony unfolds in normal duration.

Impossible to capture in a neat formula, avant-garde cinema is recognizable by its efforts at self-expression or experimentation outside mainstream cinema. Yet the boundary lines can be breached. Techniques associated with the avant-garde have been deployed in music videos by Michel Gondry and Chris Cunningham. In fact, Conner, Anger, Derek Jarman, and other experimentalists were early pioneers of music video. Meanwhile, mainstream features have been continually drawing on the avant-garde for ideas and techniques, just as experimentalists have plundered mainstream films for ideas to push in unexpected directions.

Types of Form in Experimental Films

Like documentaries, experimental films sometimes use narrative form. James Sibley Watson, Jr., and Melville Webber's 1928 film *The Fall of the House of Usher* evokes the atmosphere of the Edgar Allan Poe story through expressionistic sets and lighting. Occasionally, we find an experimental film organized by categories. Peter Greenaway's *The Falls* traces, in alphabetical order, information about an imaginary group of people with the surname Fall. Christian Marclay's 24-hour *The Clock* is organized by times of day, as illustrated in shots from fiction films.

Two other types of form are characteristic of experimental films: abstract form and associational form.

Abstract Form: Introduction

When we watch a film that tells a story, or surveys categories, or makes an argument, we usually pay little attention to the sheer pictorial qualities of the shots. Yet it's possible to organize an entire film around colors, shapes, sizes, and movements in the images.

How could you do this? Consider *Railroad Turnbridge*, by the sculptor Richard Serra. A turnbridge allows a section of railroad tracks to swivel on a central column, clearing space for tall boats passing along a river. Serra set up a camera at the center of a turnbridge and filmed the bridge's movement. The result onscreen is surprising. The bridge is swiveling, but because the camera is anchored to it, the crossed girders and powerful uprights seem monumentally static, and the landscape rotates majestically (10.58). There is no argument here, no survey of categories. A narrative film might have used the bridge for an exciting chase or fight, but Serra invites us to contemplate the bridge as a geometrical sculpture, all grids and angles, in relation to the curves and sweeps of nature beyond. Serra asks us to notice and enjoy the slowly changing pictorial qualities of line, shape, tonalities, and movement.

Of course, all films contain pictorial qualities like these; we noticed them when we studied mise-en-scene, frame composition, and editing. In this chapter, we've seen how the lyrical beauty of the river and lake shots in *The River* functions to create parallels, and the rhythm of its musical score enhances our emotional involvement in the argument being made. But in *The River*, an abstract pattern becomes a means to an end, always furthering Lorentz's rhetorical purposes. *The River* isn't organized around abstract qualities but rather emphasizes such qualities only occasionally. In **abstract form**, the whole film's patterning will be determined by such qualities.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

Designing Form in an Abstract Film

How can you organize a film based on visual qualities? A common option is a pattern of *theme and variations*. This term usually applies to music, where a melody or other type of motif is introduced, and then a series of different versions of that same melody follows—often with such extreme differences of key and rhythm that the original melody becomes difficult to recognize.

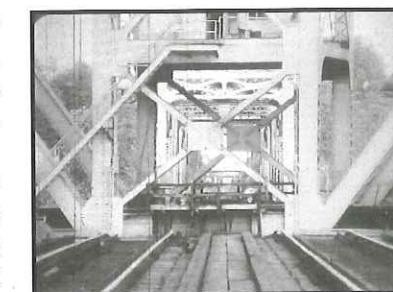


10.57 *Scorpio Rising*. As a young man fetishistically tunes up his bike, the figure of death looms above him. On the soundtrack we hear, "My boyfriend's back . . . and he's coming after you."



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Christian Marclay's *The Clock* is both an epic experimental film and a clock itself, because the times shown onscreen correspond to the time that the audience is living. See our entry "Time piece."



10.58 Abstracting a real object. The slowly changing background emphasizes the symmetrical geometry of the bridge's design in *Railroad Turnbridge*.

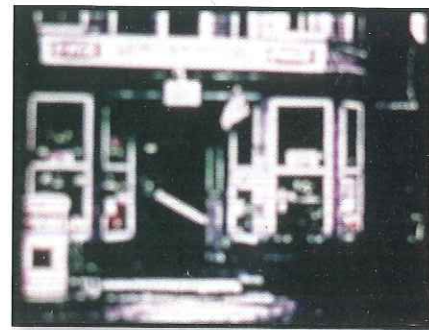
You can design an abstract film's form in a similar fashion. An introductory section typically shows us the kinds of relationships the film used as its basic material. Then other segments go on to present similar kinds of relationships but with changes. The changes may be slight, but soon they will differ sharply from the introductory material. Bigger contrasts emerge, and sudden variations can help us to sense when a new segment has started. If the film's formal organization has been created with care, the similarities and differences won't be random. There will be some underlying principle that runs through the film.

The theme-and-variations principle is clearly evident in J. J. Murphy's *Print Generation*. Murphy selected 60 shots from home movies, then rephotographed them over and over on a contact printer. Each succeeding duplication lost photographic quality, until the final images became unrecognizable. *Print Generation* presents the footage 25 times, starting with the most abstract images and moving to the most recognizable ones. Then the process is reversed, and the images gradually move back toward abstraction (10.59, 10.60). On the sound track, the progression is exactly the opposite. Murphy rerecorded the sound 25 times, but the film begins with the most clearly audible version. As the image clarifies, the sound deteriorates; as the image slips back into abstraction, the sound clarifies. Part of the fascination of this experimental film derives from seeing blobs and sparkles of abstract color become slowly defined as people and landscapes before passing back into abstraction. The film also teases us to discover its overall formal pattern.

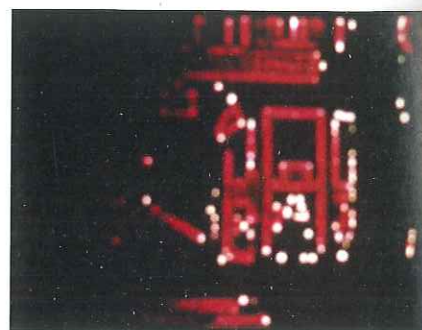
As *Railroad Turnbridge* and *Print Generation* indicate, by calling a film's form abstract, we don't mean that the film has no recognizable objects in it. True, you could make an abstract film out of pure shapes and colors, created by painting, drawing, cutting out pieces of colored paper, or playing with computer-generated shapes. But you could also film real objects in such a way that their abstract qualities come forward. After all, every abstract quality you might explore exists both in nature and in human-made objects. Bird songs, cloud formations, the markings on fur or feathers—natural phenomena like these attract us because they seem beautiful or unusual. They are some of the same qualities that we look for in artworks. Moreover, even those objects that we create for very practical uses may have pleasing contours or textures. Chairs are made to sit on, but we will usually try to furnish our home with chairs that also look attractive to us.

So experimental filmmakers often start by photographing real objects. But the filmmakers then juxtapose the images to emphasize relations of shape, color, movement, and so on. As a result, the film is still using abstract organization in spite of the fact that we can recognize the object as a bird, a face, or a spoon.

The result often pushes us to use our senses in an unusual way. Normally, there's a practical purpose in noticing abstract qualities. Driving a car, we use colors and shapes to spot traffic signs and signals. Picking out a new shirt or dress, we often ask whether it makes us look fashionable or will cost too much. In watching an abstract film, though, we don't need to use our eyes for practical purposes. The abstract side of the world becomes interesting for its own sake.



10.59



10.60

“Thematic interpretation comes from literature: it's been carried over to conventional narrative films, but it shouldn't be grafted onto experimental films, which are often a reaction against such conventions.”

—J. J. Murphy, experimental filmmaker

10.59–10.60 Theme and variations in *Print Generation*. In early portions of the film, each one-second shot is more or less identifiable (10.59). After many generations of reprinting, the same image becomes abstract, with hot highlights remaining (10.60). The color is biased toward red because that is the last layer of the emulsion to fade in rephotography.

This “impractical” interest has led some critics and viewers to think of abstract films as frivolous. Critics may call them “art for art's sake,” since all they seem to do is present us with a series of interesting patterns. Yet these films make us more aware of such patterns. No one who has watched *Railroad Turnbridge* can see bridges in quite the same way afterward. In talking about abstract films, we might amend the phrase to “art for life's sake,” because such films can enhance our lives as much as do films of other formal types.

An Example of Abstract Form: *Ballet Mécanique*

Ballet mécanique (“Mechanical Ballet”), one of the earliest abstract films, was also one of the most influential. It remains a highly enjoyable avant-garde film and a classic example of how mundane objects can be transformed when their abstract qualities become the basis for a film's form.

Two filmmakers collaborated on *Ballet mécanique* during 1923–1924. They were Dudley Murphy, a young American journalist, and Fernand Léger, a major French painter. Léger had developed his own version of Cubism in his paintings, often using stylized machine parts. His interest in machines contributed to the central formal principles of *Ballet mécanique*.

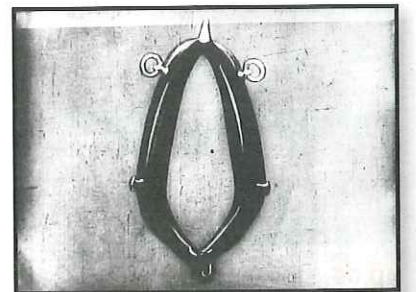
This title suggests a paradox. We expect a ballet to be flowing, with human dancers performing it. Here, however, we have a mechanical dance. Few of the many objects in the film are actually machines; we see hats, faces, bottles, kitchen utensils, and the like. But the context trains us to see even a woman's moving eyes and mouth as being like machine parts.

Film style plays a crucial role in most films using abstract form. In keeping with its overall formal design, *Ballet mécanique* uses film techniques to stress the geometric qualities of ordinary things. Close framing, masks, unusual camera angles, and neutral backgrounds isolate objects' shapes and textures (10.61). Through overall form and selected techniques, Léger and Murphy reverse our normal expectations about the nature of movement, making objects dance and turning human action into machine motion.

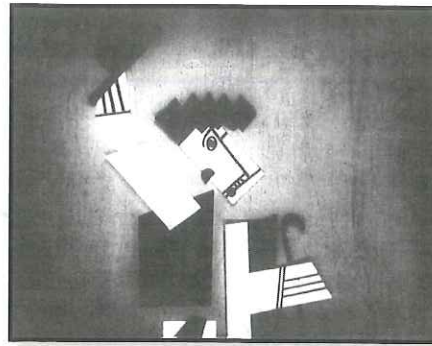
We can't segment *Ballet mécanique* by tracing its arguments or dividing it into scenes of narrative action. Instead, we must look for changes in abstract qualities occurring at different points in the film. Going by this principle, we can find nine segments in *Ballet mécanique*:

- C. A credits sequence with a stylized, animated figure of Charlie Chaplin (“Charlot” in France) introducing the film's title.
1. The introduction of the film's rhythmic elements.
2. A treatment of objects viewed through prisms.
3. Rhythmic movements.
4. A comparison of people and machines.
5. Rhythmic movements of intertitles and pictures.
6. More rhythmic movements, mostly of circular objects.
7. Quick dances of objects.
8. A return to Charlot and the opening elements.

Ballet mécanique uses the theme-and-variations approach in a complex way. Léger and Murphy introduce many individual motifs in rapid succession, then bring them back at intervals and in different combinations. Each new segment picks up on a limited number of the abstract qualities from the previous one and plays with these for a while. The final segments use precise elements from early in the film once again, so that the ending strongly echoes the opening.



10.61 Abstracting ordinary objects. A horse collar in *Ballet mécanique*.



10.62

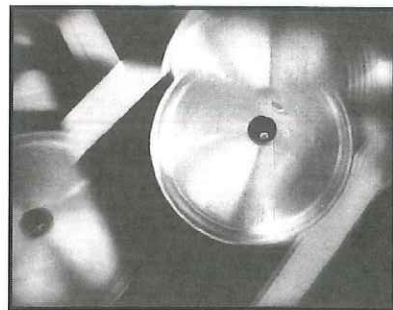
10.62–10.63 Humans become puppets. The figure of Charlie Chaplin is highly abstract—recognizably human but also made up of simple shapes that move in a jerky fashion (10.62). A more realistic figure, a woman swinging and looking this way and that, becomes a puppet too (10.63).



10.63



10.64



10.65

10.64–10.65 Film technique makes real objects abstract. The woman now swings upside down (10.64), and a prismatic shot makes a pot lid into a disc, its shape picking up that of both the ball and the hat of the previous segment (10.65).



10.66 Stressing pure shape. Just as the upside-down shot turned the swinging woman into mass and motion, masking makes facial expression a play of lines and textures.

Preparing Us to Notice Abstract Qualities The introductory portion of an abstract film usually gives us strong cues as to what we can expect to see developed later. *Ballet mécanique*'s animated Chaplin begins this sort of process (10.62). Already the human figure becomes an object. Segment 1 might seem to contradict this: Instead of a doll we see a woman swinging in a garden (10.63). Yet she seems unnatural: She repeatedly lifts her eyes and head and then lowers them, a fixed smile on her face. Coming after the Chaplin image, this shot cues us to notice the regular rhythm of her swinging. As we'd expect, the opening makes abstract qualities especially prominent.

Suddenly, a burst of images appears. We glimpse a hat, bottles, an abstract white triangle, and other objects. A woman's mouth appears, smiling, then not smiling, then smiling again. The hat returns, then the smiling mouth again, then some spinning gears; then a shiny ball circles close to the camera. The woman in the swing returns, but upside down (10.64). This segment ends with a shiny ball swinging back and forth directly toward the camera, and we are invited to compare its movement with that of the woman in the swing. The formal development confirms our expectation that she is not a character in a story but an object, like the bottle or the ball. The same is true of that smiling mouth, which does not suggest an emotion as much as a regularly changing shape. In the sequences to come, shapes of objects (such as the round hat and the vertical bottles), direction of movement (the swing, the shiny ball), textures (the shininess of both the ball and the bottles), and the rhythms of the objects' movements will be the qualities that draw our attention.

New Motifs With these expectations set up in the short introductory section, the film goes on to vary its imagery. Segment 2 sticks fairly closely to the elements just introduced by beginning with another view of the shiny ball, now seen through a prism. There follow other shots of household objects, also shiny and prismatic (10.65). Here is a good example of how a mundane object can be taken out of its everyday context and made abstract.

In the middle of the series of prism images, we see a rapid burst of shots, alternating a white circle with a white triangle. This is yet another motif that will return at intervals, with variations. These shapes invite us to make comparisons: The pot lid is also round, while the prismatic facets are somewhat triangular. During the rest of segment 2, we see more prism shots, interspersed with another rapid series of circles and triangles, followed by views of a woman's eyes opening and closing, a woman's eyes partially masked off by dark shapes (10.66), and finally the smiling/unsmiling mouth from segment 1.

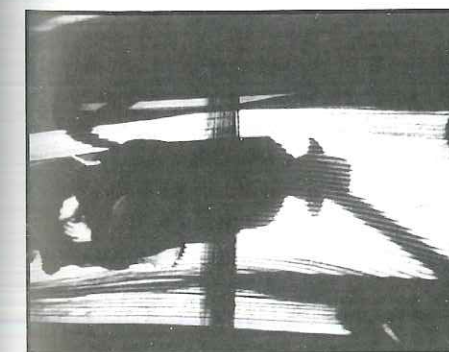
Segment 2 has further confirmed our expectations that the film will compare shapes, rhythms, or textures. We also begin to see a pattern in which bursts of brief shots interrupt the segment. In segment 1, interruptions were created by shots alternating objects and a single triangle. Now we have twice seen a circle and triangle alternate. In creating abstract relationships, the rhythm of editing becomes as important as the rhythmic movement within individual shots.

Ballet mécanique provides a good example of how filmmakers may work outside the continuity editing system and create intriguing patterns of shots. One of the film's funniest moments in segment 2 depends on a precise graphic match (10.67–10.69). Once again, aspects of the human face are reduced to moving geometry. Amusing touches like this make *Ballet mécanique* as enjoyable to watch today as it must have been when it was first shown 80 years ago.

Now that our expectations about the film are more or less established, the film plays with them by introducing new elements. Segment 3 begins with shots of rows of platelike discs, alternating with spinning shapes reminiscent of a fairground game wheel. Will round shapes and movements provide the main principle of development in this segment? Suddenly, the camera plunges down a twisting fairground slide. We see marching feet, cars hurtling over the camera, and rapid shots of a carnival ride's cars spinning past. Here different rhythms succeed one another, and common shape seems less important. Many of the objects shown are new to the film. Yet, after the carnival cars, we see a relatively lengthy shot of a spinning, shiny object—not in a prism view but at least recalling the image of the kitchen utensils seen earlier. The segment ends with the familiar rapid alternation of circle and triangle.

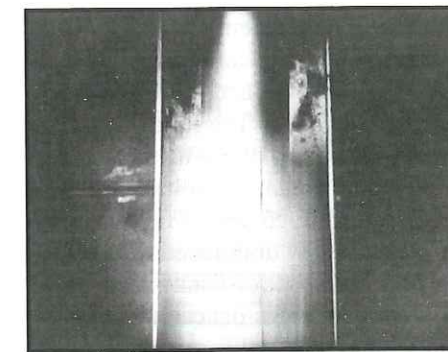
Variations at a New Level Segment 4 is quite different from earlier ones, but it does bring back motifs: The prism recurs briefly (from segment 2), spinning shiny objects recall those of segment 3, and the woman's eyes and mouth (segments 1 and 2) return, having been absent from segment 3. Above all, in this segment Léger and Murphy give us the film's most explicit comparison of humans and machines.

We first see a carnival slide from above, picking up on an element from segment 3. The slide stretches across the screen, and in quick succession, a man's silhouette whizzes along it four times (10.70). Next we see a machine part, strongly vertical on the screen (10.71), with a piston moving up and down rhythmically. Again we see similarities—a tubelike object with another object moving along it—and differences—the compositions use opposing directions. More shots compare the slide and machine parts, ending with one machine seen through a prism. After more of the alternating circle and triangle, and more spinning shiny objects and machine parts, the film brings back the motif of the woman's masked eye (as in 10.66). Now the motions of the eye are compared to machine parts.



10.70

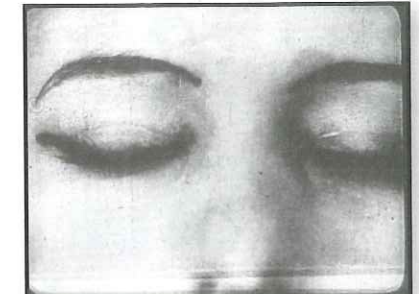
10.70, 10.71 Geometrical clashes. The fairground slide's horizontal layout (10.70) clashes with the vertical piston (10.71).



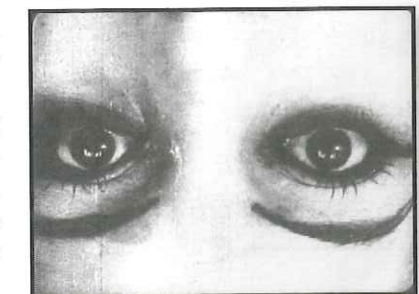
10.71



10.67

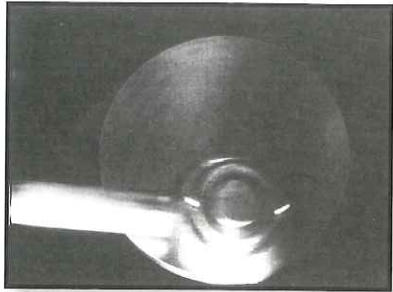


10.68



10.69

10.67–10.69 Those eyes . . . We see an extreme close-up of a woman's wide-open eyes (10.67). She closes them, leaving her eyeliner and brows as dark crescents against her white skin (10.68). A nearly unnoticeable cut presents us with a very similar composition (10.68). When the eyes pop open (10.69), we're surprised to find that the face is now upside down.



10.72



10.73

10.72–10.73 Repetitive machine, repetitive shot. A throbbing machine part gives way to many repetitions of the same shot of the laundry woman.

Segment 4 closes with one of *Ballet mécanique*'s most famous and daring moments. After a shot of a rotating machine part, we see 7 identically repeated shots of a laundry woman climbing a stair and gesturing (10.72, 10.73). After more glimpses of the smiling mouth, we get 11 more repetitions of the same shot of the laundry woman, then a shot of a large piston, and 5 more repetitions of the laundry woman shot. Instead of the woman on the swing, who moves to a rhythm she creates, the film endows the laundry woman with rhythm by repeating the same shot again and again. Again, even though she is a real woman in a real place, we must notice her movements' rhythms.

Word and Number Machines Segment 4 has been the culmination of the film's comparison of mechanical objects with people. Although some motifs, such as the masked eye, reappear in segment 5, this portion of the film will introduce a new set of elements. The clue is given at the opening. Unlike other segments, this one begins with a black screen, which is gradually revealed to be a dark card on which a white zero is painted.

Unexpectedly, an intertitle appears: "ON A VOLÉ UN COLLIER DE PERLES DE 5 MILLIONS" ("A pearl necklace worth 5 million has been stolen"). In a narrative film, this might give us story information, but the filmmakers are now starting to use printed language as one more visual motif for rhythmic variation. We're now peppered with quick shots showing large zeros, sometimes one, sometimes three, appearing and disappearing, shrinking and growing. Parts of the intertitle appear in isolation (*on a volé*), participating in this dance of letters. The film plays with an ambiguity: Is the zero really an "O," the first letter of the sentence? Or is it part of the number 5,000,000? Or is it a geometric representation of the pearl necklace itself? Beyond this sort of play with a visual pun, the zero recalls and varies the circle motif that has been so prominent in the film.

More punning occurs as the zero gives way to a picture of a horse collar—which resembles the zero visually but also refers to the word *collier* (which in French can mean either "necklace" or "collar"). Editing makes the collar execute a hopping dance (10.61). The collar images alternate with moving zeros and parts of the intertitle sentence, sometimes printed backward—to emphasize their graphic, rather than informative, function.

Returning to the Beginning After its efforts to mechanize words and numbers, the film moves toward variations that are closer to the opening segments. Segment 6 shows us rhythmic movements involving mostly circular shapes (10.74, 10.75). Once again we're asked to compare persons and objects. An abstract circular shape grows. A woman's face appears in a prisms view; she passes a piece of cardboard with holes cut in it before her face, with her expression continually changing in a mechanical fashion. We see the circles and triangles alternate again, but this time in four different sizes. There follows a quick series of shots of rows of shiny kitchen utensils (10.76), with short bursts of black film interspersed. This blackness picks up and varies the dark backgrounds of the intertitles in segment 5, and the shiny pots and other utensils reintroduce a motif that has appeared in every segment except 5. The motif of rows of objects had come in segment 3, while the swinging motion of the utensils in many of these shots echoes the swinging of the woman and the shiny ball from segment 1.

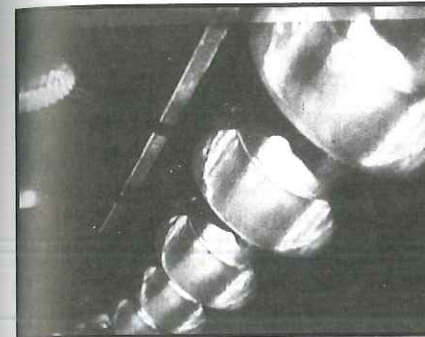
Segment 7 continues the turn back to the beginning. It begins with a shot of a display window dominated by a corkscrew shape (10.77). The circle motif returns, leading into a set of dances that vary key motifs. Very rapid editing makes a pair of mannequin legs dance (10.78); then the legs start to spin within the shots. The shiny ball motif returns, but now two balls spin in opposite directions. Then a hat and a shoe alternate quickly (10.79), and the editing creates a startlingly abstract effect. At first, we see the different shapes distinctly, but as the brief shots continue to alternate, we notice variations. The hat changes position, and sometimes the shoe



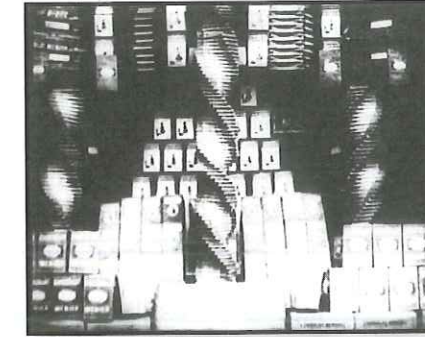
10.74



10.75



10.76



10.77

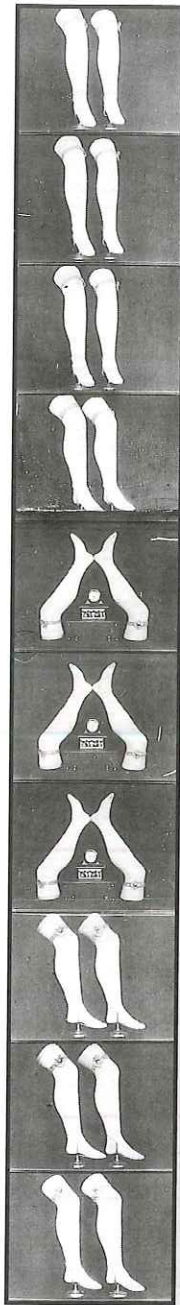
10.74–10.77 Circles. A new series of circular shapes begins with a woman's head, eyes closed (10.74). She turns, and then a statue swings toward and away from the camera (10.75). Soon there are circular kitchen utensils (10.76). In a shop window, spiral shapes seem to freeze the gyrating motions that have made up so much of the film (10.77).

points in one direction, sometimes the other. The cutting rhythm accelerates, and the shots become so short that we see only a single white object pulsating, morphing from circle to lozenge and back again. The filmmakers use the graphic contrasts they've created to make us aware of apparent motion, our tendency to see movement in a series of slightly different still pictures. This is one process that makes cinema itself possible (see Chapter 1).

After the shoe-and-hat duet, more shots of the woman follow, again making her face execute artificial shifts (10.80). Finally, quick shots of bottles make them seem to change position in a dancelike rhythm. Here, where the mechanical ballet becomes most explicit, the film draws together elements from its beginning and from the previous segment, where the recapitulation of the earlier segments had begun. Segment 7 avoids motifs from the center of the film—segments 3–5—and thus gives us a sense both that the film is continuing to develop and that it is coming full circle.

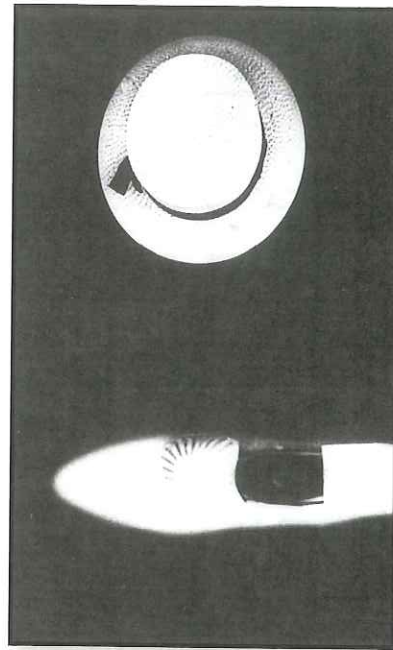
The final segment makes this return more obvious by showing us the Chaplin figure again. Now its movements are even less human, and at the end, most of its parts seem to fall away, leaving the head alone on the screen. The spinning head may remind us of the woman's profile (10.74) seen earlier. But the film is not quite over. Its last shot brings back the woman from the swing in segment 1, now standing in the same garden smelling a flower and looking casually around her (10.81).

Seen in another context, the woman's gestures might seem ordinary to us. But as Hollis Frampton puts it (p. 369), *Ballet mécanique* has taught us to look at this image in the light of everything that has come before it. By now we're so accustomed to seeing rhythmic, mechanical movement that we're invited to see her smiles and head gestures as *unnatural*, like other motifs we have seen in the film.

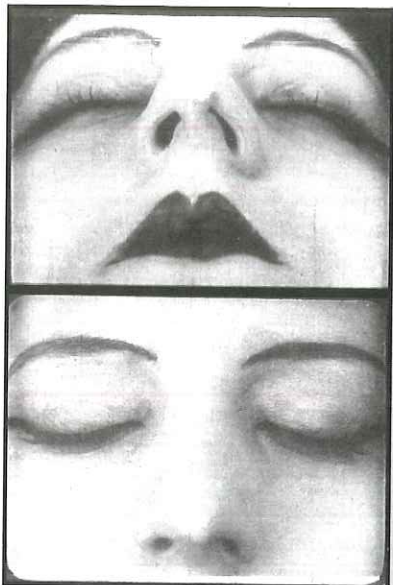


10.78

10.78–10.80 Artificial motion. The mannequin legs seem to move when they're presented in short shots (10.78). At silent film speed, the three-frame shot in the center would flash by in less than a third of a second. (Recall the short shots we described in *The Birds*, pp. 222–224.) Similarly, rapidly alternating shots make a hat seem to squash into a shoe (10.79), and a woman seem to nod her head (10.80).



10.79



10.80

Léger and Murphy end their abstract film by emphasizing how much they have altered our perception of ordinary objects and people.

Abstract form isn't only a matter of older cinema. Apart from earlier examples in this chapter, we could point to *Tape Generations* (p. 43), a recent film that creates geometric patterns out of ordinary transparent tape. Abstract form will always be attractive to filmmakers who want us to see the world around us with fresh, sharpened vision.

Associational Form: Introduction

Abstract form, then, is one option for the experimental filmmaker. Another is **associational form**. Associational form suggests ideas and emotions to the viewer by assembling images and sounds that may not have any logical connection. But the very fact that the images and sounds are put together prods us to look for some connection—an *association* that binds them together.

Bruce Conner's compilation *A Movie* is a vivid example of associational form. The 12-minute film pulls together shots of widely different things—blimps and stagecoaches, auto races and undersea exploration. Early on, shots of stagecoaches and cavalry from old Westerns are followed by shots of a charging elephant and locomotive wheels. The shots ask us to build up associations. Galloping horses are like rampaging elephants and locomotives, and all evoke motion across a landscape. Soon that association will embrace armored tanks and race cars. Eventually we'll see car crashes and vehicles hurtling off cliffs, as if the frantic race that started with cowboys has led to mass suicide.

A Movie doesn't tell a story in the manner of narrative filmmaking. It offers no characters, no specific causal connections, and no temporal order among the scenes. The film suggests that humans enjoy dangerous excitement and that films encourage that (hence the title *A Movie*). But it doesn't try to persuade us that humans are by nature reckless; Connor doesn't offer reasons or evidence. There is no voice-over narrator as in *The River* to define problems, assemble evidence, and point to a conclusion. Nor does the film explore a clear-cut set of categories. And yet *A Movie* is not purely a pictorial exercise either, in the manner of abstract form. It employs patterns of imagery and music (Respighi's classical piece *The Pines of Rome*) in order to conjure up ideas and emotions.

Poetic Film We can think of associational form as working somewhat as poetry does. When Robert Burns says, "My love is like a red, red rose," we don't assume that his love is prickly to the touch, glowing red, or vulnerable to aphids.

Rather, we look for the possible associations: Her beauty is the most likely reason for the comparison. A similar process goes on in associational films. Here the metaphorical implications that poetry conveys through language are presented in images and sounds. A director could film a woman he loved in a garden and suggest that she is like the flowers that surround her. (This might be an implicit meaning that viewers could assign to *Ballet mécanique*'s last shot, if it were taken out of context.)

Associational form offers the filmmaker a rich array of choices. You could pick very conventional images or more original ones, and you can create both simple and complicated linkages. Again, poetry offers examples. In "America the Beautiful," the images of "spacious skies," "purple mountains' majesty," and "fruited plain" add up to suggest the patriotic fervor expressed in the chorus, "God shed his grace on thee." Another poem might be more elusive in its effect, giving us less explicit statements of the associative qualities of its imagery. The Japanese poetic form called *haiku* usually juxtaposes two images in a brief three-line form, in order to express a mood. Here is a haiku by the Japanese poet Kakei:

The eleventh moon—
Storks listlessly
Standing in a row

Kakei's images are very sparse, but if we fill them in with our imaginations, we can feel a mood of autumnal stillness, with perhaps a little melancholy. This tone isn't present in the moon or the storks alone but emerges from the juxtaposition of the two images—something akin to the Kuleshov effect in film (pp. 225–226).

Basic Principles of Associational Form An entire film can be made along associational lines. But imaginative links are unpredictable, so it's impossible to generalize about this formal pattern as clearly as we can with narrative or rhetorical patterns. Still, if you were to make an associational film, you would probably follow some basic principles.

First, you would probably gather your images into distinct sections. This principle of grouping is also seen in abstract form, as our *Ballet mécanique* analysis shows. Second, your film would likely create variations from part to part. Many filmmakers achieve this by changing tempo, following a fast section by a slow one. In one section of *A Movie*, disasters result from the frantic chase we've already mentioned; later in the film, the disasters are shown in much less energetic imagery, such as acrobats balancing above a city street. Third, as with other types of form, you would probably use repeated motifs to reinforce associations. *A Movie* constantly invokes images of catastrophe, created by man or nature. Finally, associational form strongly invites interpretation, the assigning of general meanings to the film. Watching *A Movie*, we're tempted to conclude that Conner is suggesting that if a society keeps overstimulating itself, it will collapse.

Associational form tends to shy away from explicit statement, however. Very often the filmmaker won't necessarily give us obvious cues to the appropriate expressive qualities or concepts. He or she may simply create a series of unusual and striking combinations and let our imaginations tease out their relations. Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising*, for instance, strongly associates motorcycle gangs with traditional religious groups and with Nazi violence, while implying that gang regalia and rituals have homoerotic aspects.

Because associational form can be demanding for an audience, it's often confined to shorter films like *A Movie* and *Scorpio Rising*, as well as music videos like Björk's *Joga*. David Byrne's feature-length *True Stories* includes some song sequences, notably "Puzzling Evidence," that work by association. Making a lengthy film based on these principles is more of a challenge, but it can be done, as the feature-length *Koyaanisqatsi* shows.

An Example of Associational Form: *Koyaanisqatsi*

With its breathtaking desert vistas and vast cityscapes, *Koyaanisqatsi* might seem a ripe example of a *National Geographic* documentary aiming to explore different environments, perhaps through a trip taken by a friendly narrator. It might also seem ready-made for rhetorical form, perhaps pressing an argument about



10.81 Back to normal? The final shot of *Ballet mécanique*, with ordinary human movement now seeming a little mechanical.

“That shot [of a puppy in *Winter*] is preceded by a series of car headlights. So then with the dog's two black eyes, which are like negative headlights, there's something interesting to me there. . . . The nature of the human mind is such that it tries to build concepts out of each moment, and so, therefore, if I think the concept it can build is interesting and poignant, then I'll stick with it.”
—Nathaniel Dorsky, experimental filmmaker

the problems of urban sprawl and mechanized lifestyles. Yet Godfrey Reggio, the principal filmmaker behind *Koyaanisqatsi*, has claimed something quite different. The film, he says, is “meant to provoke, to offer an experience rather than an idea or information or a story about a knowable or fictional subject.”

The experience Reggio refers to, we think, stems from associational form. Because of its worldwide success as a theatrical feature, *Koyaanisqatsi* is probably the most famous example of the associational strategy. The film does suggest some ideas about technology and modern life, but it does so without appeal to narrative or rhetoric. Both large-scale parts and shot-by-shot connections are linked by principles of analogy, metaphor, and implication, the sort of principles we find in poetry. Reggio and his collaborators guide us to follow certain motifs, to make comparisons, and to register the sheer impact of images combined with expressive music. The result focuses on the differences between a natural environment and a human-made one.

The appeal to our imagination starts at the title, which will be unintelligible to most audience members. The subtitle given in some versions is “Life out of Balance,” but not until the end of the film will we learn that this phrase is one of several possible translations of *koyaanisqatsi*, a word from the Hopi Native-American language. Reggio could have called the film *Life out of Balance*, but the unfamiliar word creates an aura of mystery, along with echoes of a society very different from that of the modern America on display in much of the film.

Koyaanisqatsi can be segmented into 10 distinct parts, signaled by changes in both imagery and Philip Glass’s virtually nonstop musical score. Our titles are less precise than the ones we’ve seen in earlier segmentations in this chapter, as you might expect in a film based on imaginative associations. We’ll try to specify them more as we move through the film.

1. Prologue.
2. Drifting.
3. Flowing.
4. Taming the Land.
5. Man-Made Majesty.
6. Collapse.
7. Inhabitants.
8. The Frenzy of Daily Life.
9. Dirge.
10. Epilogue.

The film is framed by a Prologue (Part 1) and an Epilogue (Part 10), both of which center on humanlike figures painted on stone. The film doesn’t tell us that these pictographs were created hundreds of years ago by Native Americans in Horseshoe Canyon in Utah’s Canyonlands National Park. As with the title, this lack of explanation encourages us to build our own associations (10.82).

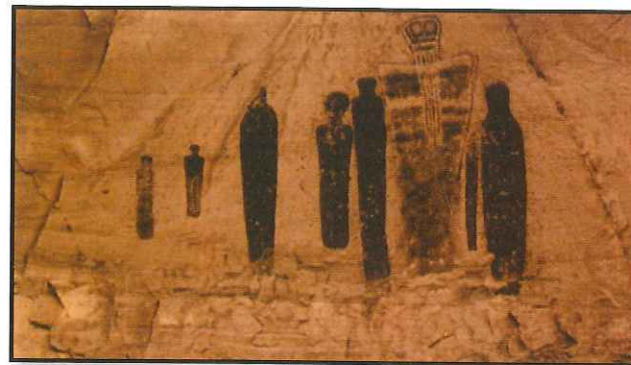
Primal Beginnings In the Prologue, the pictographs dissolve to blazing shots of a NASA rocket being launched, the fire from the blast eventually wiping across the screen. More associations accrue. The painted figures resemble rockets, and the juxtaposition of an ancient culture with a modern one marks a strong contrast between eternal calm and furious mechanical movement. On liftoff, the rocket emits a blizzard of metal fragments, a bursting motif we’ll

see later in the film (10.83). The effect is to suggest that the drawings have been incinerated.

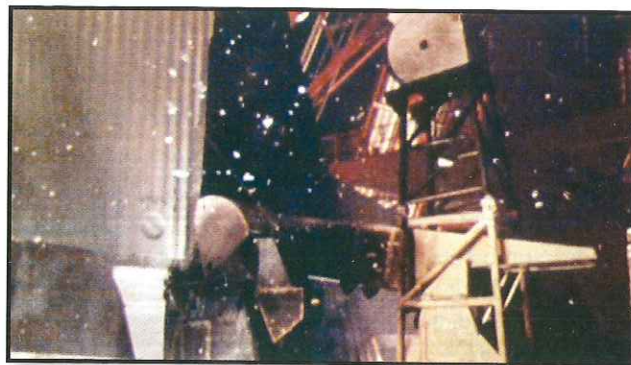
To a large extent, the Prologue gives us the film in miniature form, because many upcoming segments will end with explosions that seem to demolish natural surroundings or the human-built environment. Likewise, the Prologue establishes the power of the film’s score, a central factor in guiding us to make certain associations. The pictographs are accompanied by thunderous organ chords and a male chorus chanting, “Koyaanisqatsi.” The effect is of primal, monumental solemnity, as if the figures on the wall are chanting and the organ is providing a cavernous echo. Throughout, Glass’s rhythmic and repetitive score provides a firm base for the imagery, with changes in instrumentation often signaling a shift within a section.

Drifting and Flowing The next two sequences give us much more placid imagery, returning to the sense of serenity summoned up by the canyon drawings. Prolonged aerial shots drift over desert buttes and huge wrinkles of rock winding to the horizon. Droning chords on the sound track suggest that time is suspended. Soon things get more energetic, when the camera shows steaming and smoking craters. There follows a passage of associations based on wind (10.84, 10.85). There is plenty of movement, underlined by a fast tempo in the score, but the movement is gentler and less mechanical than what we saw in the rocket launch. A final shot of this “Drifting” part includes smoke, dripping water, and the natural movement of birds and insects (10.86). This is organic, free movement, very different from the harshness of the rocket launch.

The third sequence, which we call “Flowing,” accentuates the quality of organic movement. The camera yields fast-motion shots of clouds racing through the frame. Soon they are intercut with rushing water, inviting us to associate streams



10.82



10.83

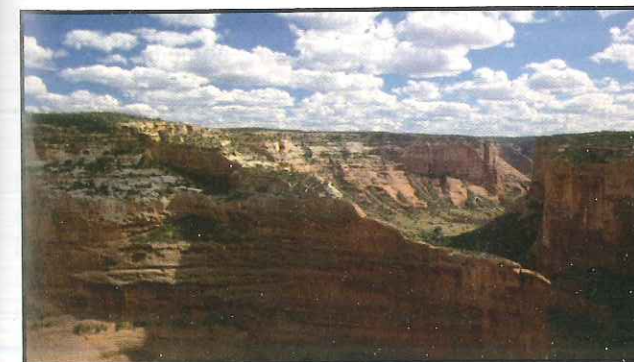
10.82–10.83 *Koyaanisqatsi*: From ancient to modern. The age and simplicity of the drawings evoke an ancient culture, while the figures convey a certain mystery (10.82). The fact that they’re painted on stone may indicate an enduring authority lacking in the modern culture we see almost immediately, in the exploding rocket (10.83).



10.84



10.85



10.86



10.87

10.84–10.87 Wind and water. An analogical link among shots: The drifting smoke (10.84) leads to blowing sand (10.85), then the shifting shadows of clouds (10.86). As if to confirm the likeness between different aspects of nature, the film gives us a “cloud waterfall” (10.87).



10.88 Webs of metal. In the Epilogue, a title will cite a Hopi prophecy that “there will be cobwebs spun back and forth in the sky,” but this metaphor is already suggested in the electric pylons standing like giants.

and rivers with clouds as another form of water (which, after all, they are; **10.87**). The movement of flowing is intensified when aerial shots race along the landscape, sort of a “cloud POV shot” as the music becomes livelier.

The unity of water, air, and land is now evident, but the terrain has changed. Instead of the desert vistas of Part 2, we have lush landscapes teeming with crops. Have the clouds and water of the early images fertilized the desert? This new blend of the elements is affirmed by a majestic aerial shot moving toward a butte surrounded by sky and water. Suddenly organic harmony is shattered by quick shots of explosions, as if the butte were under assault.

Machines Invade and Build A shift in the musical score announces Part 4, which we call “Taming the Land.” To ominously pulsing chords, trucks arrive wrapped in black smoke, contrasting with the white and gray clouds

we’ve seen in earlier sections. We glimpse some humans, but they’re swallowed up by the haze and the vast machines they manipulate. (We won’t be able to identify individuals until later in the film.) Colossal pipelines cut across the landscape, and geometrical forms like wheels and grids are laid across more organic shapes (**10.88**). A fast-paced passage of mining the earth leads quickly to a string of fires and explosions, culminating in a nearly 60-second shot of an atomic bomb test. The rush of imagery suggests that taming nature has led to a cataclysm. This implication will again be tied down in the Epilogue, with a prophecy: “If we dig precious things from the land, we will invite disaster.”

“Man-Made Majesty,” our title for Part 5, begins with an image of a power plant looming over a beach where people sunbathe. Early portions of this sequence suggest that humans have created a vast environment on a scale like the buttes and canyons of the desert. The score, a warbling chorus, has a quality of awe, while the cinematography suggests a new, human-made harmony of elements (**10.89**, **10.90**). The same sort of achievement is seen in traffic, with aerial angles showing highways forming beautiful spirals and the bubbling pulse of the music suggesting elation at this splendid human accomplishment.

But technology again turns destructive. The natural flowing we saw in Part 3 is evoked, but negatively, when military images emerge. Fighter jets whoosh over the desert and missiles are launched. Again the atomic bomb is evoked, and we get another montage of explosions—this time not related to construction and mining, but wartime bombardment. The imagery reinforces the implication of the nuclear blast at the end of Part 4: The technology that built this awe-inspiring world can destroy it.

Collapse and Survivors Part 6 probes the built environment more closely, suggesting that it is vulnerable to decay, or what we’ll dub “Collapse.” The sequence starts with shining buildings, as the shadows of clouds wipe across them in the manner of the desert vistas of Parts 2 and 3. Likewise, the streets are filmed to resemble canyons (**10.91**). So far, so successful: Humans have created their own massive landscape to live in. Yet it’s an eerie place, with the sound of wind rising and fretful string chords in the score.

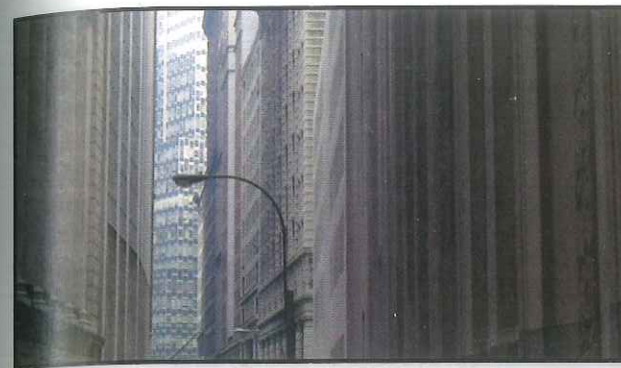


10.89



10.90

10.89–10.90 Artificial nature. Skyscrapers seem to become windows onto the sky (**10.89**), and thanks to a telephoto lens jet planes emit heat ripples that recall streams of clouds and water (**10.90**).



10.91



10.92

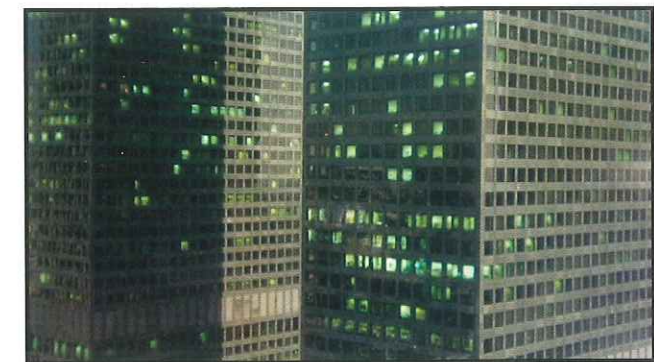
10.91–10.92 Monuments built and destroyed. City canyons echo the rugged desert landscapes (**10.91**). The destruction of failed housing projects (**10.92**) parallels the slowly floating debris seen in the opening rocket launch (**10.83**).

Gradually the cityscape becomes desolate. To the accompaniment of slowly rising and falling musical phrases, the camera takes us to decaying neighborhoods, hollowed-out buildings, and glimpses of misery. Instead of the springs and rivers seen earlier, water now sprays out of a fire hydrant. Now the wind no longer blows across sand dunes but instead ruffles dead grass and flaps a strip of canvas in a wrecked building.

After swooping aerial shots of massive housing blocks, as bare of human presence as the buttes of Monument Valley, the sequence ends in more explosions. This time the assault stems from humans’ recognition that they have failed to create a new world. To the sound of frantically wailing choruses, we see housing projects, skyscrapers, derricks, and bridges blasted apart, melting back to earth, and the sequence ends with floating debris choking the frame (**10.92**).

The ending of “Collapse” is bleak enough, but the next part, which we call “Inhabitants,” heightens this quality with a view of lowering clouds and thunderstorms striking a city. What follows is our first extended view of human-scale life in this built world. In contrast to the extreme wide-angle imagery that surveyed the desert vistas, urban spaces here and in other sections are shot with very long lenses (**10.93**). Fast- and slow-motion imagery, reinforced by plodding, electronically tinged music, offer glimpses of people (**10.94**). Are they enjoying their lives? Are they unhappy? We’re allowed to come to our own conclusions, as a few seem quite cheerful, while others—notably the fighter pilot toward whom the camera tracks—are severe and impassive.

Life at Warp Speed Most of the film’s parts have run seven or eight minutes, but the one we call “The Frenzy of Daily Life” lasts over 20 minutes. It’s hypnotic and exhausting. The pace of the cutting and the action in the shot (given in hyper-fast motion) rises relentlessly with the dizzying pace of multiple rhythms in Glass’s score. The sequence is tied together by the images of work and play, transportation and recreation. In this respect, the sequence recalls “city symphonies” like Vertov’s *Man with a Movie Camera* (pp. 432–436).



10.93



10.94

10.93–10.94 The new world. Shadows sweep in fast motion across skyscrapers (**10.86**), as they had moved across the buttes (**10.86**). Meanwhile, citizens walk the streets, captured against ironic signs (**10.94**).



10.95

10.95–10.96 Electrical flows. In Part 4, water was shown captured (10.95); now traffic, flowing in fast motion, creates similar patterns of channeled energy (10.96).



10.96



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In “Solomonic judgments,” we examine the work of Phil Solomon, whose films blend abstract and associational formal principles.

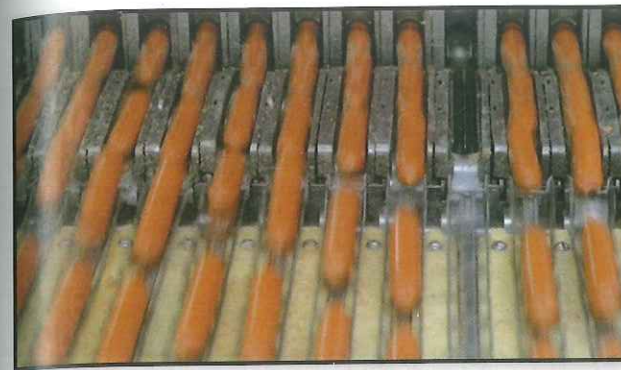
At first things are calm enough. Long, static shots show skyscrapers at dusk. Earlier we’ve seen clouds reflected in buildings, and now we see the sun set in reflection; it’s as if such natural occurrences can no longer be seen directly, only through our artificial environment. The pace picks up, and night traffic streams in accelerated motion (10.95, 10.96). The music becomes exhilarating and the city seems to pulse with energy. People rush down escalators and bustle through the streets.

As the film starts to mix daytime shots with night ones, fast-motion filming makes all human activity part of a gigantic machine. People process meat, sort letters, sew jeans, assemble TV sets. In the film’s most famous sequence, frankfurters pumped out of machines are compared to the flow of traffic and people hurtling up escalators (10.97, 10.98). This might be the moment of the film’s most explicit meaning: Mechanization has ground humans into identical sausages. These images of production are followed by shots of consumption: video games, bowling, film viewing, and above all eating (10.99, 10.100). Still building the pace, the sequence shows people leaving work, commuting home, and reveling in consumption (10.101, 10.102). The sequence climaxes in a flurry of TV images, with talking heads and commercials bombarding us. A reprise of people stalking to the camera as in the “Portraits” section seems to remind us that the frantic robots we’ve seen are really human, but this passage is interrupted by another string of explosions. Now it’s TV sets that are blown up, suggesting that the new built environment includes the media world, and it, too, is self-destructive.

We call Part 9 “Dirge” because it changes tempo drastically from the furious movement of its predecessor. Slow, nearly silent shots gliding over the city suggest a weary giant at rest. Urban grids are now compared to the patches on a microprocessor (10.103, 10.104), as if the city were no longer a machine but a repository of information.

The bits, we might think, are the people, and immediately we see them in a rather different way than we do in “Inhabitants.” To plaintive organ chords and an almost funereal chorus, people haunt the streets. A woman can’t light her cigarette; a policeman lifts a man off the sidewalk. Most faces are blank, puzzled, or suspicious (10.105). These wraiths might be the exhausted survivors of all the hectic rush of the previous section. Are they zombies or ghosts (10.106)? Abruptly, a rocket is launched, and (as in *Ballet mécanique*) the film starts to circle back to its opening imagery.

Several sections of *Koyaanisqatsi* have included extremely lengthy shots. The image of the passenger jet nosing its way through traffic runs about two and a half minutes. Arguably, however, the nearly four-minute slow-motion shot of the rocket rising and exploding and falling to earth forms the climax of the film (10.107).



10.97



10.98



10.99



10.100



10.101



10.102

10.97–10.102 People as products. Juxtaposing commuters and frankfurters, both shoved through rigid pathways, implies that mechanization has turned people into standardized units (10.97, 10.98). Fast food becomes very fast food in this rapid footage of mass-produced snacks and people eating identical items (10.99, 10.100). A shot hurtling through the streets (10.101) is followed by a Twinkie’s-eye view (10.102), as if the people hurrying home had become another assembly-line product.

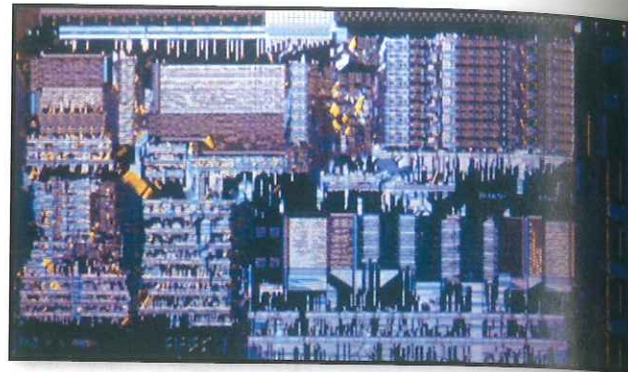
A briefer shot shows the rocket as it continues to spin endlessly in its descent, and Glass’s repetitive score, replaying the hollow chanting of the title that we heard at the start, gives no hint about when the rocket will hit the earth. The image fuses many motifs: air and fire and smoke, as well as the bright particles that have showered other scenes. More broadly, the rocket that was launched in the Prologue has now apparently self-destructed, and along with it the overambitious hopes of man-made technology.

The Epilogue, a very brief sequence, returns to the canyon pictures and zooms back to a fuller view before the shot fades out. Appended titles give the word *koyaanisqatsi* several definitions, including “a state of life that calls for another way of living.” A film using rhetorical form would have spelled out that new way, but



10.103

10.103–10.104 Grids. The city as microchip.



10.104



10.105

10.105–10.106 Faces of the city. Glimpses of life on the street (10.105). On the Stock Exchange, ghosts trade shares (10.106).



10.106

this film doesn't do that. Indeed, by opening out the title onto a range of meanings, Reggio encourages us to create various interpretations of the film we have seen.

All these associations point toward some implicit meanings. We might say, for instance, that the film implies that technological progress is too often pursued without thinking about its consequences for both nature and human beings. This theme would tie together a lot of what we've seen, especially the final contrast between the rocket's death spiral and the solemn humanoids on the walls. We have already quoted two of the three closing Hopi prophecies that sum up certain motifs, and the third one recalls the plummeting rocket: "A container of ashes might one day be thrown from the sky, which could burn the land and boil the oceans."

Like other associational films, *Koyaanisqatsi* invites us to tease out implications from its combination of images and sounds. That invitation doesn't end with the epilogue. There is no spoken language in the film until now, but as the final credits roll, we hear a babble of voices. It's a mix of TV commercials, newscasts, and stock-market reports. This sound montage reenacts the associational patterning we've seen onscreen throughout the film, but it also reminds us of the overwhelming media environment in which we live. Having exercised our eyes and ears and imaginations, this final sequence suggests, we might return to our everyday world more sensitive to the costs of the modern American way of life.



10.107 Epilogue. The final piece of debris: The exploded rocket spins endlessly.

The Animated Film

Most fiction and documentary films photograph people and objects in full-sized, three-dimensional spaces. As we have seen, the standard shooting speed for such *live-action* filmmaking is usually 24 or 25 frames per second.

Animated films are distinguished from live-action ones by the kinds of work done at the production stage. Instead of continuously filming an ongoing action in real time, animators create a series of images by shooting one frame at a time. Between the exposure of each frame, the animator changes the subject being photographed. Daffy Duck isn't a tangible creature you can film, but you can film a series of slightly different images of Daffy as single frames. When projected, the images create illusory motion comparable to that of live-action filmmaking. Anything in the world can be animated by means of two-dimensional drawings, three-dimensional objects, or information stored in software. As we shall see, digitally created films usually imitate the various traditional methods of animation.

Because animation is the counterpart to live action, any sort of film that can be shot live can be made using animation. We're most familiar with animated fiction films, both short and featurelength. There are animated documentaries too, usually instructional ones. Animation provides a convenient way of showing things that are normally not visible, such as the internal workings of machines or the extremely slow changes of geological formations. We've already seen animation used for charts and graphs in documentaries such as *Inside Job* (10.2). More daringly, after interviewing Israeli army veterans, Ari Folman sought to represent their lives and recollections in hallucinatory animated imagery (10.108).

With its potential for stylized imagery, animation lends itself readily to experimental filmmaking as well. Many classic experimental animated films employ either abstract or associational form. For example, both Oskar Fischinger and Norman McLaren made films by choosing a piece of music and arranging abstract shapes to move in rhythm to the sound track.

Types of Traditional Animation

The oldest type of animated film is *drawn* animation. From almost the start of cinema, animators drew and photographed long series of cartoon images. At first, they drew on paper, but copying the entire image, including the setting, over and over proved too time consuming. During the 1910s, animators started using clear rectangular sheets of celluloid, nicknamed *cels*. Characters and objects could be drawn on different cels, and these could then be layered like a sandwich on top of an opaque painted setting. The whole stack of cels would then be photographed. New cels showing the characters and objects in slightly different positions could then be placed over the same background, creating the illusion of movement (10.109).

The cel process allowed animators to save time and to split up the labor among assembly lines of people doing drawing, coloring, photography, and other jobs. The most famous cartoon shorts made during the 1930s to the 1950s were made with cels. Warner Bros. created characters such as Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Tweety Bird; Paramount had Betty Boop and Popeye; Disney made both short films (starring Mickey Mouse, Pluto, Goofy) and, beginning with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* in 1937, feature-length cartoons.

Cel animation continued well into the 1990s, with big-budget studio cartoons employing *full* animation. This approach renders figures in fine detail and supplies them with tiny, nonrepetitive movements. (See 4.146, as well as 5.138–5.140.) Cheaper productions use *limited* animation, with only small sections of the image



10.108 The animated documentary. A recurring memory image in *Waltz with Bashir* shows soldiers wading toward an eerily beautiful bombardment.

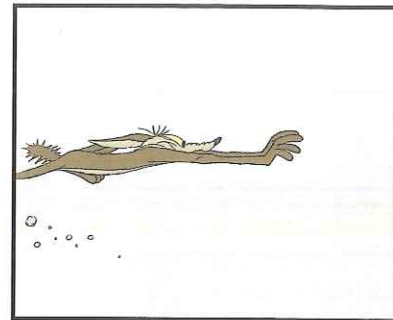
“Animation is not a genre, it's a medium. And it can express any genre. I think people often sell it short. But 'because it's animated, it must be for kids.' You can't name another medium where people do.”

—Brad Bird, director, *The Incredibles*



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For a discussion of how animation can be used in documentaries, see “Showing what can't be filmed.”



10.109

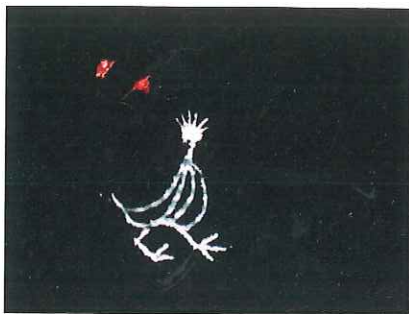


10.110

10.109–10.110 Cel animation. Two layered cels from a Road Runner cartoon, with Wile E. Coyote on one cel and the patches of flying dust on another (10.109). Limited animation in *Silent Möbius* creates fairly static images recalling comic-book panels (10.110).

“You don’t very often see model animation which is well lit, do you? For me, that’s part of the comedy of it; I love the idea that you’re making a thriller and it all looks authentic, but the lead character is in fact a Plasticine penguin.”

—Nick Park, director and animator, *The Wrong Trousers*



10.111

moving from frame to frame. Limited animation is mainly used on television, although Japanese theatrical features also exploit it (10.110).

Cels and drawings are photographed, but you can create animation without a camera. You might draw directly on the film, scratch on it, even attach flat objects to it. Stan Brakhage taped moths’ wings to film stock in order to create *Mothlight*. The innovative animator Norman McLaren made *Blinkety Blank* by engraving the images frame by frame, using knives, needles, and razor blades (10.111).

Another type of traditional animation working with two-dimensional images involves *cut-outs*. Sometimes filmmakers make flat puppets with movable joints (10.112). Animators can also manipulate cut-out images frame by frame to create moving collage (10.113). A very simple form of cut-out animation involves combining flat shapes of paper or other materials to create pictures or patterns. *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut* employs computer animation to mimic the rudimentary shapes and unshaded colors of crude cut-out animation.

Three-dimensional objects can also be manipulated frame by frame to create apparent movement. Animation of objects falls into three closely related categories: clay, model, and pixillation. *Clay animation*, often termed *claymation*, sometimes actually does involve modeling clay. But more often, flexible Plasticine is used, since it is cleaner to work with and is available in a wider range of colors. Sculptors create objects and characters of Plasticine, and the animator then bends, twists, or stretches them slightly between exposures.

Although clay animation has been used occasionally since the early years of the 20th century, it has grown in popularity since the mid-1970s. Nick Park’s *Creature Comforts* parodies the talking-heads documentary by creating droll interviews with the inhabitants of a zoo. His “Wallace and Gromit” series (including *The Wrong Trousers* and *A Close Shave*) and *Chicken Run* (codirected with Peter Lord; 10.114) contain complex lighting and camera movement.

Model or *puppet animation* is often similar to clay animation. As the name implies, it employs figures with bendable wires or joints. Historically, the master of this form of animation was Ladislav Starevich, who as early as 1910 baffled Russian audiences with realistic insect models acting out human dramas and comedies (10.115). Starevich’s puppets display intricate movements and detailed facial expressions (4.90). Some of the main characters in his films had up to 150 separate interchangeable faces to render different expressions. Perhaps the most famous animated puppet was the star of the original 1933 version of *King Kong*, a small, flexible doll. If you watch *King Kong* closely, you can see his fur rippling—the traces of the animator’s touch as he shifted the puppet between exposures. Recent feature-length puppet films include *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Coraline*, and *Fantastic Mr. Fox* (10.116).

Pixillation is a term applied to frame-by-frame manipulation of people and ordinary objects (10.117). Although actors ordinarily move freely and are filmed



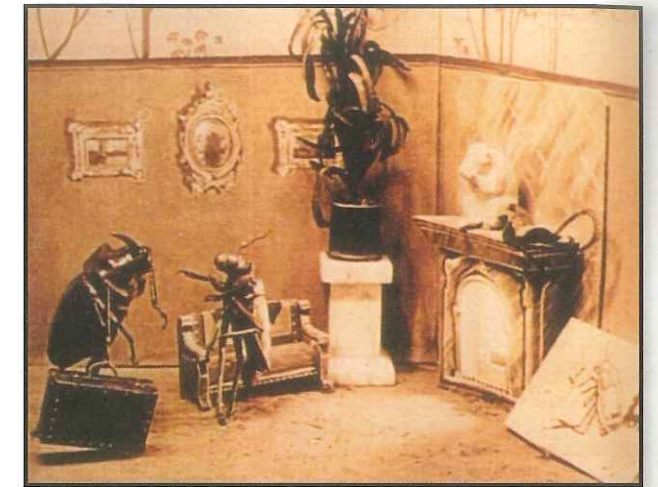
10.112



10.113



10.114



10.115



10.116



10.117

10.114–10.117 Animating objects. A flock of Plasticine hens in *Chicken Run* receives Hollywood-style lighting (10.114). In 1912, *A Cameraman's Revenge* used realistic insect puppets to enact a comic melodrama of infidelity, jealousy, and revenge (10.115). In *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, the hero endangers his family and neighbors when he can't resist his urge to steal from local farmers (10.116). In 1908, Arthur Melbourne-Cooper animated toys in a miniature set to create dense layers of movement in *Dreams of Toyland* (10.117), an early example of pixillation.

in real time, occasionally an animator pixillates them. That is, the actor freezes in a pose for the exposure of one frame, then moves slightly and freezes again for another frame, and so on. The result is a jerky, unnatural motion quite different from ordinary performance. The innovative animator Norman McLaren uses this approach to tell the story of a feud in *Neighbours* and to show a man struggling to tame a rebellious piece of furniture in *A Chairy Tale*.

Traditional animation has sometimes been mixed with live-action filming. Walt Disney's earliest success came with a 1920s series, “Alice in Cartoonland,” which embedded an actress in a black-and-white drawn world. Gene Kelly entered a world of cels to dance with Jerry the Mouse in *Anchors Aweigh*. Perhaps the most elaborate combination of cel animation and live action has been *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (5.58).

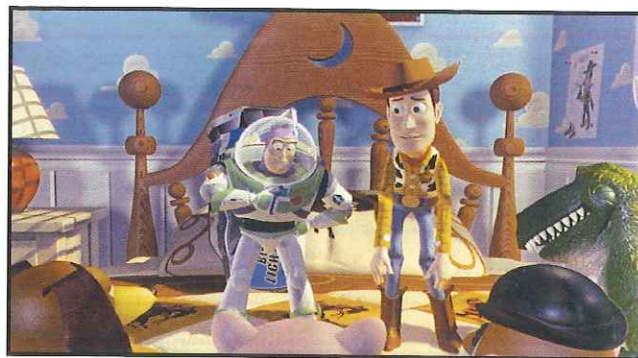
Types of Computer Animation

Computer imaging has revolutionized animation. Software can quickly generate the thousands of slightly altered images that will supply the illusion of movement. On a creative level, software can be devised that enables filmmakers to create images of things that could not be filmed in the real world.

CGI (computer-generated imagery) was used occasionally for special effects scenes in the 1970s and 1980s. In the next decade, George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic, Steve Jobs's Pixar Animation, and other firms developed powerful computers and complex programs for creating animated imagery. Images generated in computers were transferred to film either by filming directly off a high-resolution monitor or by using a laser to imprint individual pixels onto each frame. In 1995, Pixar's *Toy Story*, the first animated feature created entirely via computer, was released through Disney. It presented a compelling three-dimensional world peopled by figures that resembled Plasticine models (10.118). Pixar's programs steadily improved the rendition of fur (*Monsters, Inc.*), water (*Finding Nemo*), reflective metal (*Cars*), and other surface textures.

Toy Story's illusion of solid, sculptural cartoon figures helped establish the conventions of **3D computer animation**. (The term "3D" is also applied to movies giving a stereoscopic impression of depth when viewed through special glasses, as indicated in Chapter 5. Things get confusing when some animated films are released in stereoscopic 3D, so we can have "3D animation" that isn't presented in 3D projection. Usually only the context indicates which type of 3D is being referred to.) By contrast, **2D computer animation** uses digital imaging to simulate the look of traditional cel animation, as in *The Prince of Egypt* and *My Dog Tulip*.

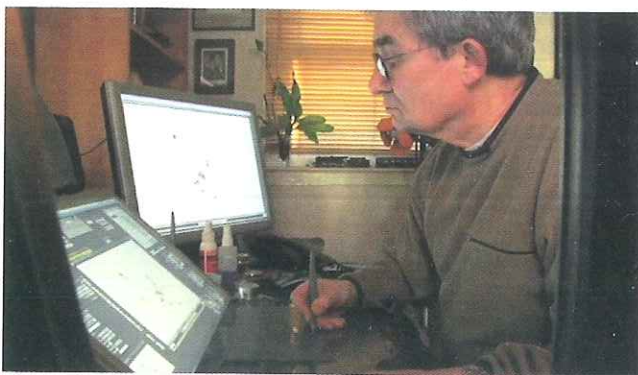
"Computer animation" doesn't mean that the filmmaker just makes a few mouse clicks and the computer generates a movie. The software can work only with what the filmmaker puts into it. If you were to make a computer-animated film, your input might be a scanned image (10.119) or a three-dimensional model. You might draw on a digital tablet (10.120, 10.121) or build up a wire-frame image and



10.118



10.119

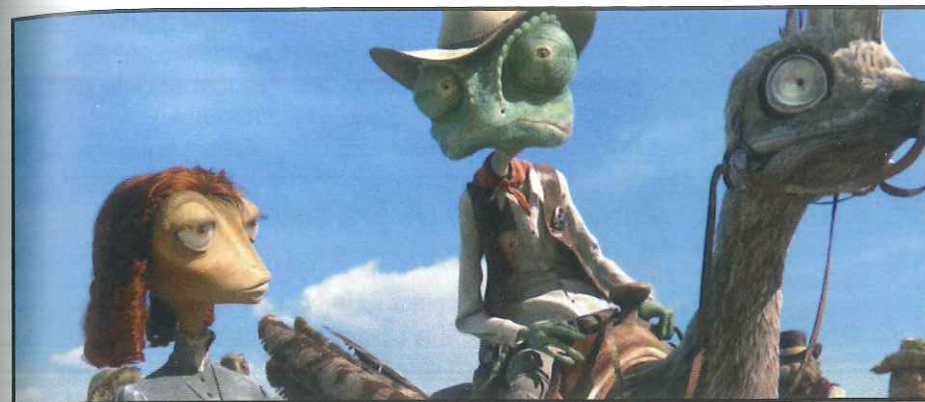


10.120



10.121

10.118–10.121 Computer animation. *Toy Story*'s computer-generated world (10.118). Nina Paley created all the images for her feature *Sita Sings the Blues* herself. Here she combines scans from printed images in a collage fashion, placing a scanned silhouette in the foreground, and placing a computer-generated sunburst shape as a background (10.119). Compare her image with *Frank Film*, 10.113. Paul and Sandra Fierlinger worked on their own to draw and color the 2D images for *My Dog Tulip*. Here Paul draws on a digital tablet (10.120). The result resembles traditional cel animation (10.121).



10.122



10.123

10.122–10.123 Digital animation mimics traditional animation. The digital characters in *Rango* resemble puppets (10.122). Ben Hibon designed digital silhouettes for the three-minute animated segment of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1* (10.123). Hibon, a fan of Lotte Reiniger, deliberately recalled the effects she achieved with paper cut-outs (10.112).

then render a surface onto it. Increasingly, visual material is fed into the computer using motion capture, as we saw in Chapter 4 (pp. 137–140). Once the basic visual material is digitized, you would create the most important bits of the figures' movements (called "keyframing"). The software fills in the frames between those poses, saving you the effort of creating every frame yourself. Other programs add color, texture, and lighting.

The kinds of films made with computer animation are similar to the traditional ones we surveyed above. 3D animation frequently resembles puppet films. In *Rango*, a Western parody featuring a chameleon as a reluctant sheriff, solid shapes and detailed textures suggest elaborate three-dimensional creatures (10.122). Similarly, the short segment, "The Tale of the Three Brothers," an animated scene in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, imitated the look of a traditional silhouette film (10.123).

Some animators, most famously Hayao Miyazaki, combine analog and digital imaging (10.124). They may draw the pictures but use a paint program to add the color. Or a complicated camera movement may be rendered using computer animation, while the rest of the film is hand-drawn. This tactic was also used in *The Illusionist*, where a shot flying over a cityscape was created via computer while the other shots used traditional cel drawings.

Traditional animation was so labor intensive that for decades only the extensive Disney studio could regularly turn out full-length animated features. The lower cost of computer animation has led to an explosion of feature-length cartoons. Moreover,

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For more on Ben Hibon's animated segment of *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1*, see "Three minutes of 'Three Brothers.'"

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We comment on the Oscar-nominated animated shorts for 2007 in "Do sell us shorts," and the ones for 2008 in "Do sell us shorts, the sequel." The rise of computer animation led to an expansion of the Best Animated feature Oscar category. We discuss the trend in "The other expanded Oscar category."



10.124 Merging cel and computer animation. In *Princess Mononoke*, five portions of the image (the grass and forest, the path and motion lines, the body of the Demon God, the shading of the Demon God, and Ashitaka riding away) were joined by computer. That yielded smoother, more complex motions than regular cel animation could achieve.

“As the six-year-old boy protested when I was introduced to him as the man who draws Bugs Bunny, ‘He does not! He draws pictures of Bugs Bunny.’”

—Chuck Jones, animator

“Animators have only one thing in common. We are all control freaks. And what is more controllable than the inanimate? You can control every frame, but at a cost. The cost is the chunks of your life that the time consuming process devours. It is as if the objects suck your time and energy away to feed their own life.”

—Simon Pummell, animator

as Nina Paley’s *Sita Sings the Blues* and Paul and Sandra Fierlinger’s *My Dog Tulip* show, an individual or small team can make professional-level features that play in theaters and at festivals. Thanks to digital technology, animation has moved into the mainstream of commercial filmmaking.

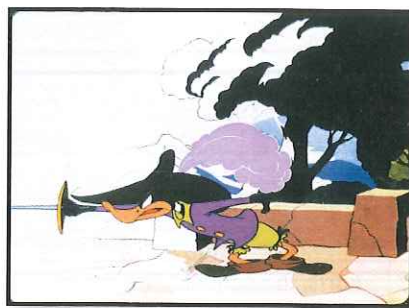
An Example of Traditional Animation: *Duck Amuck*

During the golden age of Hollywood short cartoons, from the 1930s to the 1950s, Disney and Warner Bros. were rivals. Disney animators had far greater resources at their disposal, and their animation was more elaborate and detailed than the simpler Warner product. Warner cartoonists fought back by exploiting the comic fantasy possible in animated films and playing with the medium in imaginative ways.

Warner Bros. cartoons reveled in fast, violent action. In *Rabbit Seasoning*, shotgun blasts keep rearranging Daffy Duck’s features. The Warner team exploited an impudent tone as well, making Daffy and Bugs Bunny wisecracking cynics far removed from the sweet altruism of Mickey Mouse. Warner’s comedy was often surreal, letting characters speak to the audience or mock studio executives. The unit’s producer Leon Schlesinger appeared in *You Ought to Be in Pictures*, letting Porky Pig out of his contract so that he could move up to live-action features.

Of the many Warner experiments, none went further than *Duck Amuck*, directed by Charles M. (Chuck) Jones in 1953. It is now recognized as one of the masterpieces of American animation. Although it was made within the Hollywood system and uses narrative form, it has an experimental feel because it invites the audience to take part in an exploration of techniques of cel animation.

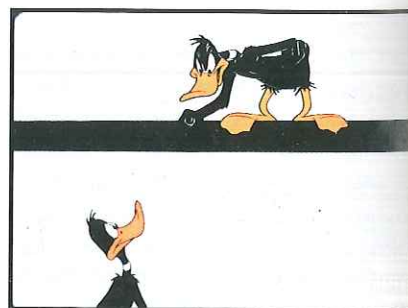
As the film begins, it seems to be a swashbuckler of the sort Daffy Duck had appeared in before, such as *The Scarlet Pumpernickel* (1950), itself a parody of one of Errol Flynn’s most famous Warner Bros. films. When Daffy is first seen, he is a dueling musketeer. But when he moves to the left, he passes the edge of the painted background (10.125). He’s baffled, calls for scenery, and exits. A giant animated brush appears from outside the frame and paints in a barnyard (10.126). When Daffy enters, still in musketeer costume, he is annoyed but changes into a farmer’s outfit. Such quick switches continue throughout the film, with the paintbrush and a pencil eraser adding and removing scenery, costumes, props, and even Daffy himself, with dizzying illogic. At times the sound cuts out, or the film seems to slip in the projector, so that we see the frame line in the middle of the screen (10.127).



10.125



10.126



10.127

10.125–10.127 The breakdown of cartoon space. Early in *Duck Amuck*, the background tapers off into white blankness (10.125). An inappropriate background for a swashbuckler appears in the blank space (10.126). In *Duck Amuck*, as the image apparently slips in the projector, Daffy splits in two and converses with himself (10.127).

All these tricks result in a peculiar narrative. Daffy repeatedly tries to get a plot, any plot, going, and the unseen animator constantly thwarts him. As a result, the film’s principles of narrative progression are unusual. We begin to realize that the film is creating comedy by frankly acknowledging various techniques of animation: painted backgrounds, sound effects, framing, music, and so on. Meanwhile, the outrages perpetrated against Daffy escalate, and his frustration builds accordingly. Soon a mystery surfaces. Who is this perverse animator? Why is he tormenting Daffy?

At the end, the mystery is solved when the animator blasts Daffy with a bomb and then closes a door in his face (10.128). The next shot moves us to the animation desk itself, where we see Bugs Bunny, who has been the animator all along. He grins at us: “Ain’t I a stinker?” (10.129). To a spectator who has never seen a Warner Bros. cartoon before, this ending would be puzzling. The narrative logic of *Duck Amuck* depends largely on knowing that Bugs and Daffy often costarred in other cartoons. Invariably the calm, ruthless Bugs would get the better of the manic, dim-witted Daffy.

Duck Amuck’s use of animation techniques is just as unconventional as its narrative form. Because the action moves so quickly, we might fail on first viewing to note that aside from the credit title and the familiar “That’s All, Folks!” logo, the film contains only four separate shots, three of which come in quick succession at the end. The bulk of the cartoon consists of a single lengthy and continuous shot—animation’s equivalent of a long take. Yet the settings and situations change quickly as the paintbrush and pencil re-create the image, and Daffy moves in and out of the frame. Often he appears against a stark white background. Such moments emphasize the fact that in cel animation, the figures and background are layers that can be photographed separately. In *Duck Amuck*, the only certain space is that of the frame itself—a quality quite different from the clearly established settings provided in more conventional cartoons.

Similarly, the time frame becomes warped as Daffy moves into and out of diegetic situations, launching into one possible plotline only to find it cut short by the mystery animator. Daffy keeps assuming that the cartoon is just beginning, but time is flowing inexorably by in the outer cartoon, *Duck Amuck* itself. (Traditionally, cartoons were around seven minutes long to fit into the shorts section of movie theater programs.) At one point more than halfway through, Daffy shouts, “All right! Let’s get this picture started!” Immediately a “The End” title appears, but Daffy pushes it aside and tries to take charge: “Ladies and gentlemen, there will be no further delays, so I shall attempt to entertain you in my own inimitable fashion,” going into a soft-shoe routine against the blank background.

Duck Amuck also plays with onscreen and offscreen space. Many of the startling transformations we witness come from outside the limits of the frame. Most



10.128

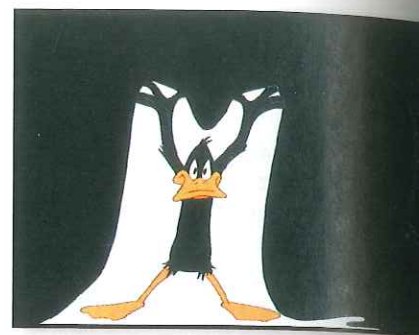


10.129

10.128–10.129 Who’s in charge here? A pencil protruding into the frame finally begins to reveal *Duck Amuck*’s fiendish animator (10.128). As in many other Warner Bros. cartoons, Bugs turns and speaks to the audience after he triumphs over Daffy (10.129).



10.130



10.131

10.130–10.131 Daffy beseiged. Daffy is trapped without background or sound track (10.130). Daffy struggles to preserve his personal space as the frame collapses on him like syrup (10.131).

important, the unknown animator is in the space from which the camera photographs the scene, with the brush and pencil sliding in from under the camera. Daffy enters and exits frequently, and the frame often moves to reveal or conceal new portions of the scenery. When the sound cuts out entirely, Daffy asks to get it back (10.130), and then we hear a scratchy sound, as if from a phonograph playing a worn record. This unseen phonograph provides inappropriate noises—a machine gun when Daffy strums the guitar, a donkey's bray when he breaks it—an elaborate joke on the fact that in animated films, the sound is never really produced by the characters and objects we see on the screen.

The most spectacular gag involving the space outside the edges of the image comes when the top of the frame sags, dripping down onto Daffy (10.131). For a moment, what we can't see—the areas outside the frame—invade what goes on inside it.

The inventiveness of *Duck Amuck* sets it apart from typical Hollywood animated films. Yet Chuck Jones also motivates its play with the medium by using narrative form, situating it in the genre of comedy, and presenting familiar characters (Bugs mistreating Daffy, as usual). It's possible to go further, however. Other filmmakers have created experimental animation more surprising and disturbing than the antics of the Warner Bros. stars.

An Example of Experimental Animation: *Dimensions of Dialogue*

Jan Švankmajer, a Czech animator, is probably best known for the feature-length narrative films *Alice* and *Faust*. But he has also explored several daring formal options. His short film *Game of Stones* utilizes abstract form in the manner of *Ballet mécanique*. Another short, *Historia Naturae, Suita*, is organized by ancient biological categories (Reptiles, Birds, Sea-dwelling, and others) and whimsically correlates each one with a different musical form (tango, minuet, and so on). This film, incidentally, reminds us that categorical form isn't found only in documentaries.

Short or long, Švankmajer's films display a striking individual style. Most of his work relies on pixillation, which creates movement by shifting the positions of humans or objects frame by frame. His shots often look like still-life paintings, but they are seldom still. Stones, skulls, stuffed animals, and slabs of meat scuttle around Švankmajer's frames. In giving life to our everyday tools and furnishings, Švankmajer reawakens the sense of magic that we find in the earliest pixillated films.

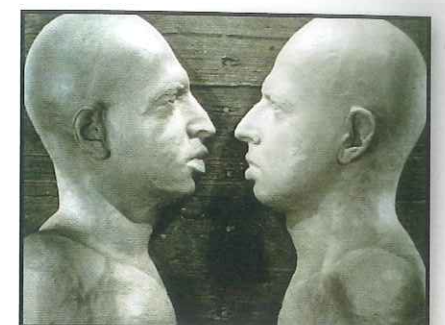
But his approach to pixillation is sinister. Švankmajer's world is on the verge of decay or annihilation. Everything seems to crumble, collapse, or be crushed. Thanks to fast editing and high-key lighting, close-ups of familiar objects being



10.132



10.133



10.134

10.132–10.134 "Factual Dialogue." Food profile meets Utensil profile in *Dimensions of Dialogue* (10.132). Office-Supply profile spits out Utensil profile (10.133). Throughout the film, the minced items are heaped together or whipped into a sludge that condenses into smooth heads (10.134).

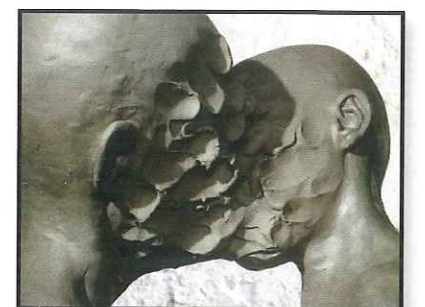
maimed or pulled apart yield an almost horrifying effect. We expect to flinch from a decaying zombie, but why should we feel repelled when we see vegetables hammered to pulp, or scissors snipping apart a peach? Švankmajer's films arouse the sense of touch by dwelling on images that a child would call icky and that a grownup might find disgusting.

Dimensions of Dialogue displays the aggressive alchemy that is Švankmajer's hallmark. Its overall structure depends on an odd trio of categories: "Factual Dialogue," "Passionate Dialogue," and "Exhausting Dialogue." The titles are important clues to interpretation, but initially they serve to mark off three narrative encounters between vaguely human characters made of clay or assembled out of house-hold objects.

Dialogue as Aggression The first episode is populated by vaguely human profiles. One is made out of common food items, another out of kitchen utensils, a third out of office supplies. The action consists of a simple theme-and-variations pattern. Two of the profiles lumber along and meet (10.132). In each "dialogue," one profile devours the other, chops and mashes its components mercilessly, and spews out the bits (10.133). After several such ravenous encounters, the profiles are reduced to mush, metal shards, and paper scraps. Finally the profiles emulsify into smooth rounded heads (10.134). This shift into identical heads is puzzling but becomes coherent in retrospect. The process of reducing differences among the "speakers" will conclude later parts.

"Passionate Dialogue" gives us a more familiar story. Human figures made of smooth clay, reminiscent of the busts at the end of "Factual Dialogue," face each other across a table. One is male, the other female. They share a kiss, and this leads to a complete merger of their forms, an analogy to copulation (10.135). Once they have split apart, a lump of clay is left over. It tries to get their attention, but both mistreat it. When the man tries to mash the "baby" into the woman's face, she scratches his face, and soon they are tearing each other apart. In the end both dribble into a mass of clay.

The final episode, "Exhausting Dialogue," revives motifs from the first two parts. Two clay busts of men's heads echo the end of Part 2 (10.134), though these middle-aged fellows aren't identical, as the heads were earlier. The heads spring up from a mass of clay and rest on a table, recalling the end of the second part. As in the first part, household objects are brought into play in a cycle of turn-taking that resembles conversation. Each man sticks out his tongue and reveals an object resting on it (10.136). Returning to a theme-and-variations structure that sets up clear expectations, this "Exhausting Dialogue" is also an exhaustive one, running through humorous but also disturbing combinations of familiar things.



10.135 "Passionate Dialogue." Male and female figures kiss and merge into one another.

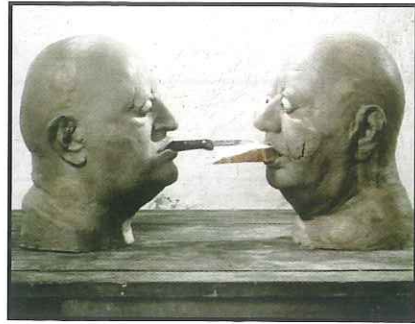


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We look at a very creepy version of *Alice in Wonderland* made by Švankmajer in "That reminds me..."

"We have been seeking the feeling of emotional security in touch from the day we were born, in our tactile experiences with our own mother. This was our first contact with the world, before we could see it, smell it, hear it, or taste it."

—Jan Švankmajer, animator



10.136



10.137



10.138

10.136–10.138 “Exhausting Dialogue.” Butter knife and bread meet in the third section (10.136). The opening passage suggests cooperation, with each man’s object appropriate to his partner’s. In the second round of exchanges, however, the objects don’t suit one another, and the encounters turn violent (10.137). The dialogue ends with deflated heads (10.138).

In the first round, each man’s proffered object complements the other man’s. One offers a toothbrush, the other toothpaste. One offers bread, the other butter. After four turns in which each pair of objects harmonizes, the men switch positions. Now the process breaks down crazily. Toothpaste is spread on bread, butter drips onto a pencil, and a pencil sharpener grinds away at a toothpaste tube. Every possible mismatch is tried, always with disastrous results (10.137).

The heads, now starting to crack, swap places again. Each man’s tongue offers his counterpart an identical object—shoe to shoe, laces to laces, and so on. But this apparent harmony is actually undercut because the objects always start fighting. Slices of bread become jaws; shoelaces wrestle one another. When all of the possibilities have been exhausted, the heads sag like fallen soufflés (10.138).

Formal Patterning: Theme and Variations The simplicity of each episode highlights some subtle variations. Part 1’s profiles are flat, whereas figures in the following sections are three dimensional. Švankmajer has filmed each set of conversationalists differently, with Part 2 introducing head-on views and shot/reverse shot angles. The couple in Part 2 have blank eyes, but the men in Part 3 have realistic and expressive eyes of different colors. Parts 1 and 3 assemble kitchen and office implements. The profile figures are collaged from familiar tools, while the tongue sequence brings mismatched objects into harsh conflict. Švankmajer was affiliated with the Czech branch of the Surrealist movement, reminding us that artists in this vein often used bizarre juxtapositions to evoke the mystery and irrationality of life. (See pp. 468–470.)

The force of these juxtapositions is greater because the objects have vivid textures. The smooth clay figures in Part 2 eventually become a mass of smudges, while the poor offspring of the mating ceremony gets mashed against the table and its parents. The brutal chopping and shredding of items in Part 1 are shown in high-key lighting more appropriate to food photography, while Part 3’s punishing tongue close-ups could make any viewer squirm (10.139, 10.140). The film would be much less harsh without all the glimpses of unassuming objects pulped and shredded, accompanied by whacks and crunches on the sound track.

Each episode features violent confrontation. Part 2’s erotic encounter gives conflict an eerie human face, and the other sections are just as disquieting. We’re not used to seeing tools and vegetables maiming each other, or tongues flexing like fists. Although the assaults have a dark humor, the imagery and abrupt, grating noises suggest a mechanized massacre (10.141, 10.142). In making us feel the pain of these inanimate objects, Švankmajer has made a shocking, violent movie without gore.



10.139



10.140



10.141



10.142

10.139–10.142 Tabletop Armageddon. In Part 1, an envelope viciously crushes thimbles (10.139). In Part 3 a pencil sharpener peels slivers of the butter knife onto the tongue (10.140). An apple is strangled in Part 1 (10.141), and pencils collide like jousting lances in the last segment (10.142).

Conversation as Annihilation In about 11 minutes, *Dimensions of Dialogue* surveys different sorts of interactions, and it cries out for thematic interpretation. Here, instead of being a civil exchange of ideas and opinions, dialogue consists of unbridled attack and retaliation. In the “Factual Dialogue,” even before views are exchanged, one head minces another. But nobody wins: Eventually all three speakers are reduced to rubbish and then identical busts. Is the film suggesting that inducing someone to agree with you eventually creates a bland uniformity?

Švankmajer made the film during a period of severe political repression in Czechoslovakia, and some critics see the first episode as an implied protest against state-imposed conformity. From this perspective, the “factual” side of the conversation wouldn’t be a matter of arguing about facts but rather recognizing the basic fact that under tyranny dialogue is nonexistent. Opinions get crushed, and everyone winds up looking and thinking the same. Significantly, the film was banned by the Communist government.

Part 2 doesn’t start with the violence that opens the first dialogue. Here the couple’s mutual attraction seems to hold out the possibility of harmony. But soon they attack their offspring and eventually one another. Again, the individuals are reduced to uniformity, a heap of clay, but this time in a family setting.

Harmony and cooperation are again seen at the start of Part 3. When butter meets bread and laces wind their way onto shoes, both parties seem to be in agreement. Yet the tongue game spirals into an exchange of mismatched objects, as if the two heads are talking past one another, and violence is the result. During the third round of Part 3, the heads thrust out identical objects, in effect “saying the same thing.” Yet even the identical objects attack one another. This might imply that each person isn’t really responding to the other, that dialogue has become two



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We profile another great experimental animator in “Len Lye, Renaissance Kiwi.”

monologues. In the end, both partners have collapsed, becoming, like the characters at the end of the previous parts, indistinguishable.

Throughout the film, face-to-face interactions are brutally aggressive and self-destructive, and they usually end in exhaustion. This is a fairly bleak view of human relationships, but delivered with arresting imagery and black humor.

Like *Duck Amuck*, *Dimensions of Dialogue* summons up bizarre transformations and creates comedy by violating our expectations. But Daffy’s dislocated adventures are eventually explained by Bugs’s prankishness. The Švankmajer flavor is more elusive. Setting a trio of narratives within the frame of categorical form, he takes us through sharply etched formal variations. These present motifs that are more disturbing, even queasy, than the slapstick offered by Chuck Jones. The very different experiences provided by the two films illustrate the range of expressive choices available to the film animator.



SUMMARY

In most situations, when we watch a film, we have some idea of what type it will be, and this shapes our expectations. If we’re seeing a documentary, we expect to learn something, perhaps in a way that will entertain or move us in the process. An experimental film, however, will probably challenge us, rather like a game, to figure out its patterns and strategies. Animated films that we encounter in theaters will most likely amuse and entertain us.

In watching a documentary film, we can ask ourselves what it claims to be true about the world. Does it present one or more categories of things? If so, how are these organized? Is the filmmaker trying to convey an attitude about the topic? Are there abstract or narrative portions that lend interest to its subject? Or is the topic organized as an argument? If so, is the argument convincing?

As we have seen, experimental films often employ abstract or associational formal patterns. From moment

to moment, we can try to understand the connections among shots or small-scale segments. Is there a similarity in shapes on the screen, in directions of movement, or in colors? If so, the film probably uses abstract form. But if you detect linkages that shift in evocative ways as the film progresses, associational form is probably at work.

Animated films can present narratives, convey documentary information, or experiment with the medium. In most cases, however, you should be able to detect generally what techniques were used in making the film. Is the movement on the screen based on drawings or on moving puppets, clay figures, flat cut-outs, or computer-generated images? If you’re attentive to how these techniques are employed, you should be able to enjoy the freedom from reality that animation offers the filmmaker.

PART

5

Throughout this book we’ve asked you to think like a filmmaker, to consider how the things we see and hear in a film result from creative decision making. This perspective can give us a healthy respect for the demanding craft of making any film. More broadly, we’ve suggested that putting yourself in the filmmaker’s place yields a keener sensitivity to film artistry—how form works, how techniques are utilized, and how a film taps into wider categories such as genres.

As viewers, we don’t have access to all the filmmakers’ options. True, we may learn of some through interviews or the sort of explanations we’ve quoted throughout the book. Often we can reconstruct the logic of choice, by imagining alternative ways of lighting or staging or cutting a sequence. Normally, however, we concentrate on the result: the finished film.

Everything we’ve considered in this book prepares you to think critically about the films you encounter. Doing film criticism means thinking and talking in an informed way about a movie. As we try to get to know the film better and to understand our

responses to it, we’re inclined to share our opinions and ideas with others. We might talk with friends, or write a comment on a website. These are all informal kinds of film criticism.

You may want to pursue film criticism more systematically. Your project might be an extended web essay or blog entry, a paper for a course, or an article for a newspaper or magazine. At this point, you’re moving toward film analysis, the activity of looking closely at how the movie works. This chapter provides you some sample essays in film analysis, as well as some suggestions for how to do it.

An analyst is usually driven by some purpose. Perhaps something in the film puzzles you and you want to understand why. Or perhaps you want to find out what gave you a certain emotional response. Or maybe you want to convince others that this film is worthwhile. We prepared the analyses in this part with two other purposes. First, we want to illustrate how form and style work together in a variety of films. Second, we provide models of short critical analyses that might illuminate some aspects of a film’s workings.

These analyses don’t drain the films dry. You might study any one of the films and find many more points of interest than we’ve presented here. Entire books have been written about single films, and there still remains much to say. Cinema, like other art forms, is inexhaustible.

Critical Analysis of Films

CHAPTER

11

Film Criticism:
Sample Analyses

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For a consideration of what film critics do, including evaluation, and what part the Internet now plays, see "In critical condition," "Love isn't all you need," and "Good, old-fashioned love (i.e., close analysis) of film."

The four sections of this chapter emphasize different aspects of various films. We start by looking at two mainstream Hollywood films, *His Girl Friday* and *North by Northwest*, that illustrate classical storytelling. Here protagonists' goals, lines of story action, deadline pressures, shifts in narration, and other strategies are used in exceptionally vivid ways. We go on to consider two American independent films that accept traditional premises but turn them to unusual ends. *Do The Right Thing* relies on classical storytelling to expose social problems within a community. *Moonrise Kingdom* builds an artificial, fairy-tale world around the familiar romantic situation of a runaway couple.

We move to three films that represent alternatives to classical norms. *Breathless* relies on ambiguity of character motivation and on stretches of rambling action, all presented through loose, casual techniques. In contrast, *Tokyo Story* departs from classical norms to create a highly rigorous style. In *Chungking Express*, we are prompted to concentrate on narrative parallels.

The first two sections are concerned with fictional films, but documentaries can be no less carefully constructed. The third section considers two examples of how formal and stylistic processes can give a documentary a wide range of implications. The first, *Man with a Movie Camera*, documents a day in the life of the Soviet Union, but it also celebrates the power of cinema to transform reality. *The Thin Blue Line* tells the story of a miscarriage of justice; at the same time, it invites us to reflect on the difficulties of responsibly investigating any crime.

Finally, we move to analyses that emphasize social ideology. Our first example, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, is a film that accepts a dominant ideology and reinforces the audience's belief in that ideology. In contrast, *Raging Bull* shows how a film's ideological implications can be less clear-cut.

We could have emphasized different aspects of any of these films. *Meet Me in St. Louis*, for example, is a classical narrative film and could be considered from that perspective. Similarly, *Man with a Movie Camera* could be seen as offering an alternative to classical continuity editing. And any of the films represents an ideological position that could be analyzed. Our choices suggest only certain angles of approach; your own analyses will discover many more.

You can find analyses that have appeared in earlier editions of *Film Art* at <http://www.davidbordwell.net/filmart/index.php>. The blog on the site also contains many analyses of sequences and entire films.

The Classical Narrative Cinema

His Girl Friday

1940. Columbia. Directed by Howard Hawks. Script by Charles Lederer from the play *The Front Page* by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. Photographed by Joseph Walker. Edited by Gene Havlick. Music by Morris W. Stoloff. With Cary Grant, Rosalind Russell, Ralph Bellamy, Gene Lockhart, Porter Hall.

His Girl Friday is often said to be the fastest sound comedy ever made, largely because most of the dialogue is delivered at a machine-gun pace. It resembles *The Social Network*, another movie driven by quick thinkers and fast talkers. To speed up the dialogue, director Howard Hawks encouraged his actors to allow few pauses and to start talking before the previous actor had finished. In *His Girl Friday*, however, dialogue isn't the only factor creating a sense of speed. Conventions of classical narrative form, along with particular film techniques, play important parts in this whirlwind experience.

"If you'll ever listen to some people who are talking, especially in a scene of any excitement, they all talk at the same time. All it needs is a little extra work on the dialogue. You put a few words in front of somebody's speech and put a few words at the end, and they can overlap it. It gives you a sense of speed that actually doesn't exist. And you can make the people talk a little faster."

—Howard Hawks, director

Lines of Action and Character Goals Classical Hollywood narrative is well suited to give the impression of speed. Its tradition of concise exposition and tightly woven plotting can carry us along swiftly. For example, *His Girl Friday* contains only 13 major scenes, so the filmmakers haven't chosen to create the pace through a series of very brief sequences. Moreover, the action takes place in only a handful of settings, so there's a sense of greater pressure as people rush in and out of the same locale and new groups of characters collide with one another in pursuit of their own purposes.

Those purposes fit into broader patterns of development. As we saw in Chapter 3 (pp. 85–86), classical Hollywood cinema often centers stories on characters with definite traits who want to achieve specific goals. These characters' contrasting traits and conflicting goals propel *His Girl Friday*'s plot forward along two primary lines of action.

1. *The romance.* Hildy Johnson wants to quit newspaper reporting and settle down with Bruce Baldwin. But Hildy's editor and ex-husband, Walter Burns, has a different goal: He wants her to continue as his reporter and to remarry him. Given these two goals, the characters enter into a conflict in several stages. First, Walter lures Hildy by promising a nest egg for the couple in exchange for her writing one last story. But Walter also arranges to have Bruce robbed. Learning of Walter's scheme, Hildy tears up her story. Walter continues to delay Bruce, however, and eventually wins Hildy through her renewed interest in reporting. She changes her mind about marrying Bruce and stays with Walter.
2. *Crime and politics.* Earl Williams is to be hanged for shooting a policeman. The city's political bosses are relying on the execution to ensure their reelection. This is the goal shared by the mayor and the sheriff. But Walter's goal is to induce the governor to reprieve Williams and thus unseat the mayor's party at the polls. Through the sheriff's stupidity, Williams escapes and is concealed by Hildy and Walter. In the meantime, a reprieve does arrive from the governor; the mayor bribes the messenger into leaving. Williams is discovered, but the messenger returns with the reprieve in time to save Williams from death and Walter and Hildy from jail. Presumably, the mayor's political allies will be defeated at the election.

The crime-and-politics line of action is tied tightly to the romance line. Walter uses the Williams case to lure Hildy back to him, Hildy chases the Williams story instead of returning to Bruce, Bruce's mother reveals to the police that Walter has

concealed Williams, and so on. More specifically, the interplay of the two lines of action alters the characters' goals. By inducing Hildy to write the story, Walter fulfills his goals of embarrassing the politicians and of tempting Hildy back into his life. Hildy's goals are more significantly changed. After she destroys her article, her abrupt decision to report on Earl Williams's jailbreak marks her acceptance of Walter's scheme. Her later willingness to hide Williams and her indifference to Bruce's pleas firmly establish her goals as linked to Walter's.

As the two goal-oriented plotlines interconnect, the actions start to multiply and expand. For example, Walter's delaying tactics (involving his confederates Duffy, Louie, and Angie) set up short-term bursts of cause and effect. At the same time, Bruce is shouldered out of the romance plot as he is shuttled in and out of precinct jails. Earl Williams undergoes a parallel experience as he is manipulated by Hildy, the sheriff, the psychologist, and Walter. Swiftly, the tangle of romance and politics pulls in secondary characters, such as Mollie Malloy (Williams's sweetheart), Bruce's mother, the other reporters, and Pettibone, the delightful emissary from the governor. All these characters aren't simply pawns of the larger plotlines, however. They can affect those plotlines by their actions, as when Earl Williams escapes or Mrs. Baldwin bursts in to denounce Walter as a kidnapper. With so many characters pulled in, swerving the action this way or that, the plot twists can become rapid and unpredictable.

Picking up the Pace: Time Pressures Classical narrative not only tries to tie all the characters to a broader momentum; it also ties one scene to another. In *His Girl Friday*, an event at the end of one scene becomes a cause leading to an effect—the event that begins the next scene. For example, at the end of the first scene, Walter offers to take Bruce and Hildy to lunch; scene 2 starts with the three of them arriving at the restaurant. In *His Girl Friday*, this linear pattern helps keep the plot action hurtling, setting up each new scene quickly at the end of the previous one.

One of the most common ways in which Hollywood storytelling dials up the pace involves setting a deadline for the action. The deadline is a convention of the newspaper genre, adding a built-in suspense factor. But in *His Girl Friday*, each line of action has its own deadlines. The mayor and the sheriff face an obvious deadline: Earl Williams must be hanged before the governor can reprieve him. In his political strategizing, Walter Burns faces the same deadline: He wants Williams reprieved.

The romance plot has deadlines as well. Bruce and Hildy are set to leave on a train bound for Albany and marriage at four o'clock that very day. Walter's machinations keep forcing the couple to postpone their departure. Add to this the fact that when Bruce comes to confront Hildy and Walter, he exits with the defiant ultimatum "I'm leaving on the nine o'clock train!" (Hildy misses that train as well.) The film's sense of mounting tension depends on the tight deadlines. If Earl Williams were to be hanged next month, or if the election were two years off, or if Bruce and Hildy were planning a marriage at some distant future date, the sense of dramatic pressure would be lacking. The piled-up deadlines squeeze together all the lines of action and sustain the breathless pace of the film.

His Girl Friday finds another, more unusual way to drive that pace. The plot presents events in straightforward chronological order, but it takes remarkable liberties with story duration. Of course, since the primary story action consumes about nine hours (from around 12:30 P.M. to around 9:30 P.M.), we expect that certain portions of time *between* scenes will be eliminated. What's unusual is that the time *within* scenes has been accelerated as well.

At the start of the very first scene, for example, the clock in the *Post* office reads 12:36; after 12 minutes of screen time have passed, the same clock reads 12:57. Yet there have been no editing ellipses in the scene; the story duration has simply been compressed. If you time the film's longest scene (33 minutes!), you will find

even more remarkable acceleration. People leave on long trips and return less than 10 minutes later. Again, the editing presents continuity of duration: It's story time that goes faster than screen time. This temporal compression combines with everything we've surveyed so far—tight causal connections, unexpected entrances and exits, and frenetically rushed dialogue—to create the film's breakneck pace.

With so much talk and turmoil, you might expect that the cutting would be quick. But actually the film's editing rhythm is much slower than we'd find in today's intensified continuity approach. The average shot in the film runs 15 seconds, four to five times slower than what we'd get in a comedy now. Instead, by sustaining the shot, Hawks can let the dialogue move more quickly, without distracting cuts, and can shift his actors around the frame in expressive patterns. Many shots let staging and the actors' performances define the comedy (11.1, 11.2). And for simultaneous dialogue, it's preferable to keep the actors in the same shot rather than trying to cut between them (11.3).

When Hawks does cut, he often uses continuity tactics to anticipate or underline a dramatic point. He will smoothly match on action during a comic climax (11.4, 11.5). Virtually every scene, especially the early restaurant lunch and the dizzying final scene in the courthouse pressroom, offers many subtle examples of classical editing. Hawks's aim is clearly to enhance the dialogue and the plot twists.

The film increases the tension of these rapid scenes through one device that involves both sound and mise-en-scene. We'd expect that newspapermen in 1939 use telephones, but *His Girl Friday* makes the phone integral to the narrative. Walter's subterfuges demand phones. At the restaurant, he pretends to be summoned away to a call; he makes and breaks promises to Hildy via phones; he directs Duffy and other minions by phone. More generally, the pressroom is equipped with a veritable flotilla of phones, enabling the reporters to contact their editors. And, of course, Bruce keeps calling Hildy from the various police stations in which he continually finds himself. The telephones become a communications network that relays story action from point to point.

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How did *His Girl Friday* go from obscurity to being hailed as a masterpiece? See "Creating a classic, with a little help from your pirate friends."



11.1



11.2



11.3



11.4



11.5

11.1–11.5 Long takes and cutting for comic flow. In *His Girl Friday*, Walter and Hildy pace in a complete circuit around the desk (11.1). Cutting would distract from Walter's dynamic and comic postures (11.2). Several long takes employ deep-space staging and deep-focus cinematography (11.3). In the opening scene, Hildy's action of throwing her purse at Walter (11.4) is matched at the cut to a more distant framing (11.5). The mismatch in his arm positions goes unnoticed in projection, probably because we tend to focus on Hildy's broader gestures.

Given the prominence of phones, Hawks visually and sonically orchestrates the characters' use of them. There are many variations. One person may be talking on the phone, or several may be talking in turn on different phones, or several may be talking at once on different phones, or a phone conversation may take place during a conversation elsewhere in the room. When several reporters race in to phone their editors, the cutting accentuates single lines or words. Later, while Hildy frantically phones hospitals, Walter hollers into another phone (11.3). When Bruce returns for Hildy, a confused din arises that eventually sorts itself into three sonic lines: Bruce begging Hildy to listen, Hildy obsessively typing her story, and Walter yelling into the phone for Duffy to clear page one ("No, no, leave the rooster story! That's human interest!"). (See 5.31.) Like much in *His Girl Friday*, the telephones are pulled into the unfolding action in ways that boost the rapid tempo.

North by Northwest

1959. MGM. Directed by Alfred Hitchcock. Script by Ernest Lehman. Photographed by Robert Burks. Edited by George Tomasini. Music composed by Bernard Herrmann. With Cary Grant, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason, Leo G. Carroll, Jessie Royce Landis.

Hitchcock long insisted that he made thrillers, not mystery films. For him, creating a puzzle was less important than generating suspense and surprise. While there are mystery elements in films such as *Notorious*, *Stage Fright*, and *Psycho*, *North by Northwest* shows that the mystery element can serve as merely a pretext for intriguing the audience. The film's tight causal unity enables Hitchcock to create an engrossing plot that fulfills the norms of classical filmmaking. This plot is presented through a narration that continually emphasizes suspense and surprise. (For more on thrillers, see pp. 332–334.)

Plot and Counterplot Like most spy films, *North by Northwest* has a complex plot. There are two main lines of action. In one, a gang of spies mistakes advertising agency executive Roger Thornhill for a secret agent, George Kaplan. Although the spies fail to kill Thornhill, he becomes the chief suspect in a murder that the gang commits. He must flee the police while trying to track down the real George Kaplan. Unfortunately, Kaplan does not exist; he is merely a decoy invented by the United States Intelligence Agency (USIA). Thornhill's pursuit of Kaplan leads to the second line of action: his meeting and falling in love with Eve Kendall, who is the mistress of Philip Van Damm, the spies' leader. The spy-chase line and the romance line further connect when Thornhill learns that Eve is actually a double agent, secretly working for the USIA. He must then rescue her from Van Damm, who has discovered her identity and has resolved to kill her. In the course of all this, Thornhill also discovers that the spies are smuggling government secrets out of the country in pieces of sculpture.

From even so bare an outline, it should be evident that the film's plot presents many conventional patterns to the viewer. There's the search pattern, seen when Thornhill sets out to find Kaplan. There's also a journey pattern: Thornhill and his pursuers travel from New York to Chicago and then to Rapid City, South Dakota, with side excursions as well. In addition, the last two-thirds of the plot is organized around the romance between Thornhill and Eve. Moreover, each pattern develops markedly in the course of the film. In the course of his search, Thornhill must sometimes assume the identity of Kaplan, the man he is trailing. The journey pattern gets varied by all the vehicles Thornhill uses—cabs, train, pickup truck, police car, bus, ambulance, and airplane.

Most subtly, the romance line of action is constantly modified by Thornhill's changing awareness of the situation. Believing that Eve wants to help him, he falls in love with her. But then he learns that she sent him to the murderous appointment

at Prairie Stop, and he becomes cold and suspicious. When he discovers her at the auction with Van Damm, his anger and bitterness impel him to humiliate her and make Van Damm doubt her loyalty. Only after the USIA chief, the "Professor," tells him that Eve is really an agent does Thornhill realize that he has misjudged and endangered her. Each step in his growing awareness alters his romantic relation to Eve.

This intricate plot is unified and made comprehensible by other strategies of classical Hollywood storytelling. *North by Northwest* has a strict time scheme, comprising four days and nights (followed by a brief epilogue on a later night). The first day and a half take place in New York; the second night on the train to Chicago; the third day in Chicago and at Prairie Stop; and the fourth day at Mount Rushmore. The timetable is neatly established early in the film. Van Damm, having abducted Roger as Kaplan, announces: "In two days you're due at the Ambassador East in Chicago, and then at the Sheraton-Johnson Hotel in Rapid City, South Dakota." This itinerary prepares the spectator for the shifts in action that will occur in the rest of the film.

Apart from the time scheme, the film also gives Thornhill specific traits of character. He's initially presented as a resourceful liar when he grabs a cab from another pedestrian. Later, he will have to lie in many circumstances to evade capture. Similarly, Roger is established as a heavy drinker, and his ability to hold his liquor will enable him to survive Van Damm's attempt to force him to kill himself when driving while drunk.

A great many motifs are repeated and help make the film cohere. Roger is constantly in danger from heights: his car hangs over a cliff; he must sneak out on the ledge of a hospital; he has to clamber up Van Damm's modernistic cliff-top house; and he and Eve wind up dangling from the faces on Mount Rushmore. Thornhill's constant changing of vehicles also constitutes a motif that Hitchcock varies. A subtler example is the motif that conveys Thornhill's growing suspicion of Eve (11.6, 11.7).

Narration and Knowledge, Suspense and Surprise Still, narrative unity alone can't explain the film's strong emotional appeal. In Chapter 3's discussion of narration, we used *North by Northwest* as an example of a hierarchy of knowledge (p. 88). We suggested that as the film progresses, sometimes we're restricted to what Roger knows, but at other times, we know significantly more than he does. At still other moments, our range of knowledge, while greater than Roger's, is not as great as that of other characters. Now we're in a position to see how Hitchcock's decision to create this pattern of narration helps create suspense and surprise across the whole film.

The most straightforward way in which the film's narration controls our knowledge is through the many optical point-of-view (POV) shots Hitchcock employs. This device yields a degree of subjective depth: We see what a character sees more or less as she or he sees it. More important here, the optical POV shot restricts us to what that character learns at that moment. Hitchcock gives almost every major character a shot of this sort. The very first optical POV we see in the film is taken from the position of the two spies who are watching Roger apparently respond to the paging of George Kaplan. Later, we view events through the eyes of Eve, of Van Damm, of his henchman Leonard, and even of a clerk at a ticket counter.

By far the greatest number of POV shots are attached to Thornhill. Through his eyes, we see his approach to the Townsend mansion, the mail he finds in the library, his drunken drive along the cliff, and the airplane that is "crop dusting where there ain't no crops." Some of the most extreme uses of optical POV give us Roger's experience directly, as when he's punched by a state trooper or caught in the path of a fuel truck.



11.6



11.7

11.6–11.7 Gesture motifs for psychological revelation. On the train, when Thornhill and Eve kiss, his hands close tenderly around her hair (11.6). But later, when he believes she has sent him to be murdered, his hands freeze in place, as if he fears touching her (11.7).



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We have several entries on Hitchcock's unique approach to storytelling. See "Dial M for Murder: Hitchcock frets not at his narrow room" and "Sir Alfred simply must have his set pieces: *The Man Who Knew Too Much* (1934)." Our series on his idea of suspense and surprise starts with "Hitchcock, Lessing, and the bomb under the table."

“He (Hitchcock) was fairly universal, he made people shiver everywhere. And he made thrillers that are also equivalent to works of literature.”

—Jean-Luc Godard, director, *Breathless*

Thornhill's optical POV shots function within a narration that is often restricted not only to what he *sees* but also to what he *knows*. The plane attack at Prairie Stop, for example, is confined wholly to Roger's range of knowledge. Hitchcock could have cut away from Roger waiting by the road in order to show us the villains spotting him from their plane, but he doesn't. Similarly, when Roger is searching for George Kaplan's room and gets a phone call from the two henchmen, Hitchcock could have used crosscutting to show the villains phoning from the lobby. (Telephone calls, as we mention on p. 263, are always notable decision points for directors.) Instead, we learn that the thugs are in the hotel when Roger does. And when Thornhill and his mother hurry out of the room, Hitchcock does not use crosscutting to show the villains in pursuit. This makes it more startling when Roger and his mother get on the elevator and discover the two men there already. In scenes like these, confining us to Thornhill's range of knowledge sharpens the effect of surprise.

Sometimes the same effect comes from the film's restricting us to Roger's range of knowledge and then giving us information that he does not at the moment have. On p. 88, we suggested that this sort of surprise occurs when the plot shifts us from Roger's escape from the United Nations murder to the scene at the USIA office, where the staff discusses the case. At this point, we learn that there is no George Kaplan—something that Roger won't discover for many more scenes to come.

The abrupt shifts from Roger's range of knowledge yield a similar effect during the train trip from New York to Chicago. During several scenes, Eve Kendall helps Thornhill evade the police. Finally, they are alone and relatively safe in her compartment. At this point, the narration shifts the range of knowledge. We see a message delivered to another compartment. Hands unfold a note: "What do I do with him in the morning?" The camera tracks back to show us Leonard and Van Damm reading the message. We realize that Eve is not merely a sympathetic stranger but someone working for the spy ring. Again, Roger will learn this much later.

Such moments evoke surprise, but we have already noted that Hitchcock claimed in general to prefer to generate suspense (p. 89). Suspense is created by giving the spectator *more* information than the character has. In the scenes we've just mentioned, once the short-term surprise has been achieved, the narration can use our superior knowledge to build suspense across several sequences. After the audience learns that there is no George Kaplan, every attempt by Thornhill to find him builds up suspense about whether he will discover the truth. Once we learn that Eve is working for Van Damm, her message to Roger on behalf of Kaplan will make us worry that Roger will fall into the trap.

In these examples, suspense arises across a series of scenes. Hitchcock also uses unrestricted narration to build up suspense within a single scene. The sequence in Chicago's Union Station employs both cutting and camera movement to widen our knowledge and create suspense. Crosscutting moves us from Roger shaving in the men's room to Eve talking on the phone. A lateral tracking shot reveals that she is talking to Leonard, who's giving her orders from an adjacent phone booth. We are now certain that the message she will give Roger will endanger him, and the suspense is ratcheted up. Note, though, that the narration doesn't reveal the conversation itself. As often happens, Hitchcock conceals some information for the sake of further surprises.

The Climax on Mount Rushmore Thornhill's knowledge expands as the lines of action develop. On the third day, he discovers that Eve is Van Damm's mistress, that she is a double agent, and that Kaplan doesn't exist. He agrees to help the Professor in a scheme to clear Eve of any suspicion in Van Damm's eyes. When the scheme (a faked shooting in the Mount Rushmore restaurant) succeeds, Roger believes that Eve will leave Van Damm. Once more, however, he has been duped (as we have). The Professor insists that she must go off to Europe that night on Van



11.8



11.9



11.10



11.11

11.8–11.11 Embedded POV patterns. In *North by Northwest*, Thornhill watches in dismay as Leonard betrays Eve to Van Damm (11.8, 11.9). When Van Damm reacts by punching Leonard, he is seen from Leonard's POV (11.10). Then Leonard is seen from his POV (11.11). This POV exchange is enclosed within a broader pattern presenting the entire scene through Thornhill's range of knowledge.

Damm's private flight. Roger resists, but he is knocked out and held captive in a hospital. His escape leads to the final major sequence of the film.

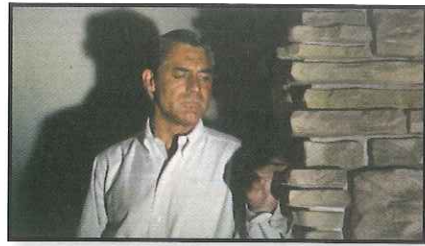
Here the plot resolves all its lines of action, and the narration continues to expand and contract our knowledge for the sake of suspense and surprise. This climactic sequence comprises almost 300 shots and runs for several minutes, but we can conveniently divide it into three sections.

In the first section, Roger arrives at Van Damm's house and reconnoiters. He clambers up to the window and learns from a conversation between Leonard and Van Damm that the piece of sculpture they bought at the auction contains microfilm. More important, he watches Leonard inform Van Damm that Eve is an American agent. This action is conveyed largely through optical POV (11.8, 11.9; also 3.20–3.22). At two moments, as Leonard and Van Damm face each other, the narration gives us optical POV shots from each man's standpoint (11.10, 11.11), but these are enclosed within Roger's ongoing witnessing of the situation. For the first time in the film, Roger has more knowledge of the situation than any other character. He knows how the smuggling has been done, and he discovers that the villains intend to murder Eve.

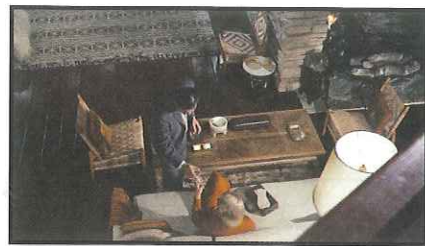
The second phase of the sequence begins when Roger enters Eve's bedroom. She has gone back downstairs and is sitting on a couch. Again, Hitchcock emphasizes the restriction to Thornhill's knowledge through optical POV shots (11.12, 11.13). This time, however, he doesn't show us what the other character sees and instead only suggests Eve's reaction (11.14). Roger's range of knowledge remains the broadest, and his optical POV encloses another character's experience. On a pretext, Eve returns to her room, and Roger warns her not to get on the plane.

As the spies make their way to the landing field outside, Roger starts to follow. Now Hitchcock's narration shifts again to show Van Damm's housekeeper spotting Roger's reflection in a television set. As earlier in the film, we know more than Roger does, and this generates suspense when she walks out . . . and returns with a pistol aimed at him.

The third section of the climax is an extended chase that shifts between restricted and unrestricted narration. As Eve is about to get on the plane, she hears shots from the house. Has the housekeeper shot Roger? No. When he arrives to rescue her, he reminds her that Leonard's gun had blanks. With the statuette the couple start to flee across the presidents' faces on Mount Rushmore. There's some crosscutting here, but mostly we are restricted to what Roger and Eve know.



11.12



11.13



11.14

11.12–11.14 Suppressing characters' POVs. To warn Eve, Roger uses his ROT monogrammed matchbook (a motif set up on the train as a joke). He tosses the matchbook down toward her (11.12, 11.13). This initiates suspense when Leonard sees it, but he unconcernedly puts it in an ashtray on the coffee table. Earlier Hitchcock shifted optical POV to present the face-off between Van Damm and Leonard (11.10, 11.11). Now he does not show us Eve's face or what she sees. Instead, through Roger's eyes, we see her back stiffen; we infer that she has noticed the matchbook (11.14).

“In *North by Northwest* during the scene on Mount Rushmore I wanted Cary Grant to hide in Lincoln's nostril and have a fit of sneezing. The Parks Commission of the Department of Interior was rather upset at this thought. I argued until one of their number asked me how I would like it if they had Lincoln play the scene in Cary Grant's nose. I saw their point at once.”

—Alfred Hitchcock, director

At the climax, Eve is dangling over the edge while she clings to Roger's hand and Leonard grinds his shoe into Roger's other hand. A rifle shot cracks out and Leonard falls unexpectedly; now the narration reveals that he was targeted by a marksman under the Professor's direction. Throughout this sequence, periods of suspense are interrupted by momentary surprises, as we recognize that there was something important we didn't know.

The same effect gets magnified at the very end. In a series of optical POV shots, Roger pulls Eve up from the cliff edge. But this gesture is made continuous, in both sound and image, with that of him pulling her up to a train bunk. The narration ignores the details of their rescue in order to cut short the suspense of Eve's plight. Such a self-conscious transition isn't completely out of place in a film that has taken time for offhand jokes. (During the opening credits, Hitchcock himself is shown being shut out of a bus. As Roger strides into the Plaza Hotel, about to be plunged into his adventure, the Muzak is playing “It's a Most Unusual Day.”) This final twist shows once again that Hitchcock's moment-by-moment manipulation of our knowledge yields a constantly shifting play between the probable and the unexpected, between suspense and surprise.

Do The Right Thing

1989. Forty Acres and a Mule Filmworks (distributed by Universal). Directed and scripted by Spike Lee. Photographed by Ernest Dickerson. Edited by Barry Alexander Brown. Music by Bill Lee et al. With Danny Aiello, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Giancarlo Esposito, Spike Lee, Bill Nunn, John Turturro, Rosie Perez.

At first viewing, Spike Lee's *Do The Right Thing*, with its many brief, disconnected scenes, restlessly wandering camera, and large number of characters without goals might not seem a classical narrative film. And, indeed, in some ways, it does depart from classical usage. Yet it has the redundantly clear action and strong forward impetus that we associate with classical filmmaking. It also fits into a familiar genre of American cinema—the social problem film. Moreover, closer analysis reveals that Lee has also drawn on many traits of classicism to give an underlying unity to this apparently loosely constructed plot.

A Day in the Life of a Community *Do The Right Thing* takes place in the predominantly African-American Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn during a heat wave. Sexual and racial tensions rise as Mookie, a pizza delivery man, tries to get along with his Puerto Rican girlfriend, Tina, and with his Italian-American boss, Sal. An elderly drunk, Da Mayor, sets out to ingratiate himself with his sharp-tongued neighbor, Mother Sister. An escalating quarrel between Sal and

two customers, Buggin' Out and Radio Raheem, leads to a fight in which Radio Raheem is killed by police. A riot ensues, and Sal's pizzeria is burned.

Do The Right Thing has many more individual sequences than *His Girl Friday* or *North by Northwest*. Even if we lump together some of the very briefest scenes, there are at least 42 segments. Laying out a detailed segmentation of *Do The Right Thing* might be useful for another analysis, but here we want to concentrate on how Lee weaves his many scenes into a whole.

Setting helps hold the characters and their actions together. The entire narrative is played out on one block in Bedford-Stuyvesant. Sal's Famous Pizzeria and the Korean market lie at one end of the block, where much of the action takes place. Other scenes take place in or in front of the brownstone buildings that line the rest of the street.

In accord with the limited setting, the action consumes a short time span, running from one morning to the next. Structuring a film around a brief stretch in the lives of several major characters isn't unknown in American filmmaking, as with *Street Scene*, *Dead End*, *American Graffiti*, *Car Wash*, *Nashville*, and *Magnolia*.

The radio DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy provides a running motif that binds the film's events together. He appears in close-up in the first shot of the opening scene, and this initial broadcast provides important information about the setting and the weather, a heat wave that ratchets up the characters' tensions and contributes to the final burst of violence. As the DJ speaks, the camera tracks slowly out and cranes up to reveal the street, still empty in the early morning. At intervals throughout the film, Mister Señor Love Daddy provides commentary on the action, as when he tells a group of characters spewing racist diatribes to “chill out.” The music he plays creates sound bridges between otherwise unconnected scenes, since the radios in different locations are often tuned to his station. The end of the film echoes the beginning, as the camera tracks with Mookie in the street and we hear the DJ's voice giving a spiel similar to the one on the previous morning, then dedicating the final song to the dead Radio Raheem.

As the setting and the neighborhood radio station suggest, *Do The Right Thing* centers more on the community as a whole than on a few central characters. The need to respect community, it seems, is a central theme of the film. On the one hand, there are older traditions that are worth preserving, represented by the elderly characters: the moral strength of the matriarch Mother Sister, the decency and courage of Da Mayor, the wit and common sense of the three chatting men, M. L., Sweet Dick Willie, and Coconut Sid. On the other hand, the younger people need to create a new community spirit by overcoming sexual and racial conflict. The women are portrayed as trying to make the angry young African-American men more responsible. Tina pressures Mookie to pay more attention to her and to their son; Jade lectures both her brother Mookie and the excitable Buggin' Out, telling the latter he should direct his energies toward doing “something positive in the community.” The emphasis on community is underscored by the fact that most of the characters address one another by their nicknames.

One of the main conflicts in the film arises when Sal refuses to add some pictures of African-American heroes to his “Hall of Fame” photo gallery of Italian Americans. Sal might have become a sort of elder statesman in the community, where he has run his pizzeria for 25 years. He seems to like the kids who eat his pizza, but he also views the restaurant as entirely his domain, emphatically declaring that he's the boss. He reveals his lack of real integration into the community and ends by goading the more hot-headed elements into attacking him.

In creating its community, *Do The Right Thing* includes an unusually large number of characters for a classical film. Eight of them provide the main causal action: Mookie, Tina, Sal, Sal's son Pino, Mother Sister, Da Mayor, Buggin' Out, and Radio Raheem. The others, intriguing or amusing as they may be, are more

peripheral, mainly reacting to the action set in motion by these characters' conflicts and goals. (Some modern American screenwriting manuals recommend seven to eight important characters as the maximum for a clearly comprehensible film, so Lee is not departing from tradition here.) Moreover, the main causal action falls into two related lines, as in *His Girl Friday* and other traditional Hollywood films. One line of action involves the community's relations to Sal and his sons; the other deals with Mookie's personal life. Mookie becomes the pivotal figure, linking the two lines of action.

Revising Classical Conventions *Do The Right Thing* also departs from classical narrative conventions in some ways. Consider the characters' goals. Usually, the main characters of a film formulate clear-cut, long-range goals that bring them into conflict with one another. In *Do The Right Thing*, most of the eight main characters create goals only sporadically; the goals are sometimes introduced fairly late in the film, and some are vague.

Buggin' Out, for example, demands that Sal put up pictures of some black heroes on the pizzeria wall. When Sal refuses and throws him out, Buggin' Out shouts to the customers to boycott Sal's. Yet a little while later, when he tries to persuade his neighbors to participate in the boycott, they all refuse, and his project seems to sputter out. Then, later in the film, Radio Raheem and the mentally disabled Smiley agree to join him. Their visit to the pizzeria to threaten Sal then precipitates the climactic action. Ironically, Buggin' Out's goal is briefly achieved when Smiley puts a photograph of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. on the wall of the burning pizzeria—but by that point, Buggin' Out is on his way to jail.

Mookie's goal is hinted at when we first see him. He is counting money, and he constantly emphasizes that he just wants to work and get paid. His repeated reference to the fact that he is due to be paid in the evening creates the film's only appointment, helping to emphasize the compressed time scheme. Yet his purpose remains unclear. Does he simply want the money so that he can move out of his sister's apartment, as she demands? Or does he also plan to help Tina care for their son?

Some characters have goals, but they are vague and long-range. Da Mayor tells Mother Sister that someday she will be nice to him. After he persistently acts courteously and bravely, she does in fact relent and become his friend. Sal's goal is similarly open ended. He wants simply to keep operating his pizzeria in the face of rising tensions. This puts him in conflict with his son Pino, who has the long-range goal of convincing Sal to sell the pizzeria and leave the neighborhood. Perhaps he will get his desire at the end, although the narrative leaves open the question of whether Sal will rebuild.

In traditional classical films, clear-cut goals generate conflict, since the characters' desires often clash. Lee neatly reverses this pattern by making character goals less sharply defined, but creating a community that is full of conflict from the very beginning of the film. Racial and sexual arguments break out frequently, and insults fly. Such conflict is tied to the fact that *Do The Right Thing* is a social-problem film. Its didactic message gives it much of its overall unity. Everything that happens relates to a central question: With the community torn with such tensions, what can be done to heal it?

The characters' goals and actions suggest some of the possible ways of reacting to the situation. Some of the characters desire simply to avoid or escape this tense atmosphere—Pino by leaving the neighborhood, Da Mayor by overcoming Mother Sister's animosity. Mookie attempts to stay out of trouble by not siding with either Sal or his black friends in their escalating quarrel. Only the death of Radio Raheem drives him to join in, and indeed initiate, the attack on Sal's pizzeria.

Other characters attempt to solve their problems. One central goal is Tina's desire to induce Mookie to behave like a responsible father and spend time with her and with their child. There is a suggestion at the end that she may be succeeding to

some extent. Mookie gets his pay from Sal and says that he will get another job and that he's going to see his son. The last shot shows him walking down the now-quiet street, hinting that he may become a better father.

The central question in the film, however, is not whether any one character will achieve his or her goals. It is whether the pervasive conflicts can be resolved peacefully or violently. As the DJ says on the morning after the riot, "Are we gonna live together—together are we gonna live?"

Do The Right Thing leaves questions unanswered at the end. Will Sal rebuild? Is Mookie really going back to see his son? Most important, though the conflict that flared up has died down, the tension is still present in the community, waiting to resurface. The old problem of how to tame it remains, and so the film does not achieve complete closure. Indeed, such an ending is typical of the social-problem genre. While the immediate conflict may be resolved, the underlying dilemma that caused it remains.

That's also why there is a deliberate ambiguity at the end. Just as we are left at the end of *Citizen Kane* to wonder whether the revelation of the meaning of "Rosebud" explains Kane's character, in *Do The Right Thing* we are left to ponder what "the right thing" is. The film continues after the final story action, with two nondiegetic quotations from Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X. The King passage advocates a nonviolent approach to the struggle for civil rights, whereas Malcolm X condones violence in self-defense.

Do The Right Thing refuses to suggest which leader is right—although the overall action and use of the phrase "by any means necessary" at the end of the credits seem to weight the film's position in favor of Malcolm X. Still, the juxtaposition of the two quotations, in combination with the open-ended narrative, also seems calculated to spur debate. Perhaps the implication is that each position is viable under certain circumstances. The line of action involving Sal's pizzeria ends in violence; yet at the same time, Da Mayor is able to win Mother Sister's friendship through kindness.

Lee's Technical Choices Like its narrative structure, the style of *Do The Right Thing* stretches the traditional techniques of classical filmmaking. The film begins with a credits sequence during which Rosie Perez performs a vigorous dance to the rap song "Fight the Power." The editing here is strongly discontinuous; sometimes she wears a red dress, sometimes a boxer's outfit, and sometimes a jacket and pants. This brief sequence, which is not part of the narrative, employs the flashy style made familiar by MTV and by television commercials. But stylization during a credits sequence is itself a convention of classical Hollywood film, as we've already seen in Chapter 3 (pp. 94–95).

Throughout *Do The Right Thing*, Lee employs the continuity system. As we saw in Chapter 6, he is adept at handling complicated scenes without breaking the axis of action (6.81–6.86, from *She's Gotta Have It*, pp. 238–239). Most scenes use standard shot/reverse shots and eyeline matching (11.15, 11.16), but other moments are marked by different handling. The lengthy conversation in which Pino asks Sal to sell the pizzeria is rendered in one solemn, somewhat suspenseful long take (11.17–11.19). At two moments, Lee cuts together two takes of the same action, so that the plot presents a single important story event twice: when Mookie first kisses Tina and when the garbage can hits Sal's window. These instances of discontinuity gain special emphasis, highlighting Mookie's genuine love for Tina and the decisive moment when he turns on Sal, the employer he's defended in earlier scenes.

Just as continuous is the sound track, which gives us the flavor of the neighborhood in a smooth sound stream. As Mookie walks past a row of houses, we hear radios tuned to different stations fade up and down, giving us audio perspective but also reminding us that the neighborhood's ethnic groups have differing tastes in music. The DJ's radio show helps pull the brief scenes together, with the same song carrying over various exchanges of dialogue.



11.15



11.16

11.15–11.16 Classical cutting and camera movement. *Do The Right Thing* often employs classic shot/reverse-shot editing, as in this conversation between Jade and Buggin' Out (11.15–11.16).

“It's funny how the script is evolving into a film about race relations. This is America's biggest problem, always has been (since we got off the boat), always will be. I've touched upon it in my earlier works, but I haven't yet dealt with it head on as a primary subject.”

—Spike Lee, from the production journal of *Do The Right Thing*



11.17



11.18



11.19

11.17–11.19 Classical cutting and camera movement. At another point Lee uses an exceptionally long take to give weight to the serious father-son exchange at the window (11.17). When Smiley appears, the forward tracking movement accumulates suspense (11.18). His interruption of their talk seems to prove Pino's point about the neighborhood, and Pino goes out to chase Smiley away while Sal slumps despondently (11.19).



11.20



11.21

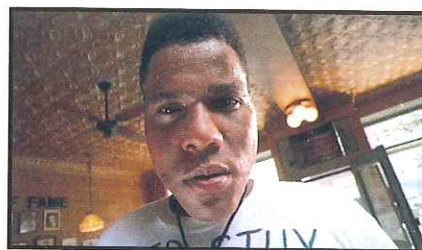


11.22

11.20–11.22 Camera movement ties together lines of action. On the morning after the riot, Da Mayor wakes up in Mother Sister's apartment. Da Mayor and Mother Sister talk and then move out into her front room, the camera tracking with them (11.20). The camera moves backward through the window as they reach it and starts to crane down (11.21). The camera movement ends on a close view of Mookie, on his way to the pizzeria (11.22).

At certain points, Lee's choices of form and style emphasize the community as a whole. The narration is largely unrestricted, flitting from one batch of characters to another, seldom lingering with any individual. Similarly, complex camera movements follow characters through the street, catching glimpses of other activities going on in the background. As in *Grand Illusion* (pp. 203–208), camera movements link characters to one another (11.20–11.22). Stylistic patterning also stresses the underlying problems in the community (11.23, 11.24).

The vagueness about goals, the treatment of the community as the central protagonist, and the moments of unusual style exemplify how Lee, like other contemporary filmmakers, has reshaped some conventions of classical filmmaking. (See pp. 482–488.) Overall, however, *Do The Right Thing* adheres to the formal



11.23



11.24

11.23–11.24 Style emphasizing community problems. Radio Raheem's threatening demeanor is emphasized in some scenes by his direct address into a wide-angle lens (11.23). Mookie's self-absorption is suggested in a visual motif of high-angle views showing him stepping unheedingly on a cheerful chalk picture of a house that a little girl is drawing on the pavement (11.24).

and stylistic traditions of Hollywood cinema. Its multiple-threaded plot builds to a climax that is causally motivated by what went before, and our responses to the characters are built out of a concise, clear narration. Lee's approach to storytelling helps his film fulfill one convention of the social-problem genre: to raise questions and to stir debate.

Moonrise Kingdom

2012. Indian Paintbrush and American Empirical Pictures (distributed by Focus Features). Directed by Wes Anderson. Scripted by Anderson and Roman Coppola. Photographed by Robert D. Yeoman. Edited by Andrew Weisblum. Music by Alexandre Desplat. With Jared Gilman, Kara Hayward, Bruce Willis, Edward Norton, Bill Murray, Frances McDormand, Tilda Swinton, Jason Schwartzman, and Bob Balaban.

Moonrise Kingdom presents a common story pattern: Young love overcomes adult opposition. But this romance is presented in a very unusual fashion. The plot juggles time frames and ranges of knowledge, posing mysteries and twisting our expectations. Sometimes the narration shifts from the young couple, Sam and Suzy, to dwell on secondary characters. Most strikingly, the story world is that of a modern fairy tale.

The action is set in 1965, so it includes references to the popular culture of that year. But *Moonrise Kingdom* doesn't try to recreate the era in the manner of movies like *American Graffiti*. It presents an enclosed, highly stylized setting: the fictitious East Coast island of New Penzance, a place with its own history, geography, and daily routines. Big-budget films like *Star Wars* and *Avatar* have created parallel universes, but *Moonrise Kingdom* is one of the few independent films that makes the same attempt.

Overseen by an elflike narrator, New Penzance seems an enchanted realm. Director Wes Anderson has transferred the cartoony look of his stop-motion animated film *Fantastic Mr. Fox* to live-action storytelling. He gives us imaginary young-adult books and a make-believe version of the Boy Scouts. Normality seems suspended (11.25–11.27). As in a fairy story, an unhappy princess in a tower waits for her hero to rescue her, while he braves the wilderness. Not only are the protagonists very young, not only does the plot make the adults seem somewhat infantile, but the characters may look as flat as paper dolls, and their homes often resemble dollhouses. This fairy-tale ambience is created by both the plotting and some unusual stylistic choices.

Four Days at Summer's End *Moonrise Kingdom* presents a simple cycle of action. Sam and Suzy run off together, get caught, and are torn apart. Then they escape again, are rescued, and stay together. Within these cycles, our goal-oriented protagonists clash with other characters—not only Suzy's parents but the Khaki Scouts sent to retrieve Sam. At the climax, when a huge storm rises, they face a conflict with nature as well. Parallel subplots run alongside the central romance. The devotion of Sam and Suzy contrasts with the ennui of Suzy's parents and the shy courtship of Scoutmaster Ward and the telephone operator Becky. Suzy likens herself to the heroines of the adventure books she reads, while Sam parallels the melancholy Sheriff Sharp, who is conducting a furtive affair with Suzy's mother.

This action, spread across four days, could have been rendered in simple chronology. But Anderson's plot plays with story order to intrigue us and build sympathy for his young couple. On the first day, we're introduced to Suzy, who's constantly scanning the landscape with her binoculars. We're immediately attached to her, and at different points we'll learn story information through POV surveillance shots. Yet when she receives a mysterious letter, we don't learn its contents, and her secret creates a mystery that leads us forward.



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For a more extensive analysis of the film, see "*Moonrise Kingdom*: Wes in Wonderland."



11.25



11.26



11.27

11.25–11.27 A make-believe world. The Khaki Scouts' treehouse is built impossibly high (11.25). A toylike landscape on New Penzance, with a lighthouse suggesting a candy cane (11.26). When Sam starts to kiss Suzy, they share a burst of electricity, the result of Sam's being struck by lightning earlier (11.27).

Many filmmakers would have followed the letter scene by showing Sam sneaking out of Camp Ivanhoe. Instead, Anderson sustains the mystery. The plot shows Scoutmaster Ward assembling his cadets, discovering Sam's escape, and alerting Sheriff Sharp. This portion of the film introduces the characters whose lives the young teens' romance will affect: Mr. and Mrs. Bishop, Sharp, and Ward and his troop. These scenes also establish Sam's background. He is an orphan, he has been ostracized by the other scouts, and his foster parents don't want him returned. Even before we meet him, he has a measure of our sympathy.

The first day ends with Ward glumly admitting that his search has failed. Then the plot skips back to the day's start and finally introduces our second protagonist, Sam. After his escape in a canoe, he meets Suzy in a meadow. A further flashback shows the reason for their rendezvous: The previous summer they met at *Noye's Fludde*, Britten's church pageant about Noah's ark (a scene that foreshadows the climactic storm). Now we realize that Sam's mysterious letter to Suzy has clinched this rendezvous.

Sam and Suzy spend the first day hiking, camping, fishing, and getting to know one another. These scenes offer a sharp contrast to the ongoing search for them. While the runaways try to be serious adventurers, the scouts hope for a violent clash, and the adults are short tempered, confused, and abrasive. As darkness falls, the Bishops discover Suzy's disappearance, and they find the letters revealing her romance with Sam. Through a quick string of flashbacks, with Sam and Suzy's voice-over, we see him bullied in the foster home and her lashing out at her parents and her classmates. These glimpses of backstory build up still more sympathy for them.

After the double-decker presentation of Day 1, the second day is presented in a more linear fashion. Brief scenes show the search party and a skirmish in which Sam and Suzy drive off the scouts. Then the adults learn from the Narrator where Sam is likely to have gone. The plot spends the rest of the day tracing the growing love between Sam and Suzy, shadowed by our knowledge that the adults are coming

to break up their idyll. The couple swim, Suzy poses for Sam's paintings, he pierces her ears, and they end up dancing and embracing. The second day ends with Suzy reading aloud to Sam at their campfire. Anderson adds another playful touch: We're about halfway through the film when Suzy reads, "Part Two."

Early on the third day the adults arrive, furious to discover Suzy and Sam asleep together. The lovers are separated. Scoutmaster Ward and Sheriff Sharp learn that Sam will probably be sent to an orphanage. While Suzy, bitter and unhappy, spends the night at home with her parents, Sam has supper with Sharp, who serves as an inarticulate father figure. But late that night the Khaki Scouts intervene and help Sam and Suzy escape to another island.

The final day merges all the storylines through crosscutting. At Fort Lebanon, a casually corrupt scoutmaster presides over the couple's mock marriage and readies them for jobs on a crab-fishing boat. As the storm hits, Ward rescues the head scoutmaster from his burning headquarters. The whole community takes shelter in the local church.

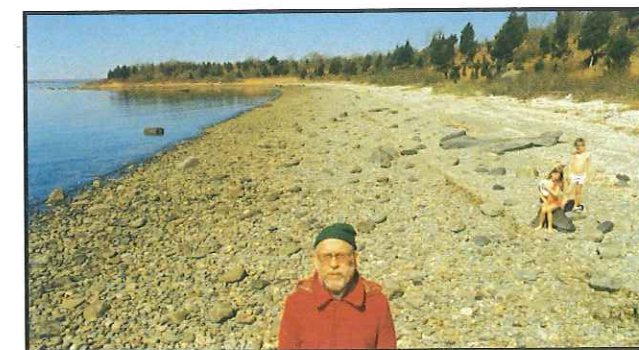
With the eloped couple still missing, the Bishops, Ward, and Sharp quarrel with one another and with the agent from Social Services. Meanwhile, Sam and Suzy make their way to the church rooftop in the driving rain, planning to jump—either to safety or to their deaths. Sheriff Sharp rescues them and extracts a promise from Social Services that he can become Sam's guardian.

The film ends more or less happily ever after. The adults' melancholy lives have improved a little. Mr. and Mrs. Bishop seem to have come to an understanding. Ward has been proven a hero and now has Becky as a romantic partner. Lonely Sheriff Sharp has gained a surrogate son. The aftermath of the storm, the Narrator informs us, has led to a lush crop yield on the island.

What of the central couple? *Moonrise Kingdom* began with a prologue touring the Bishop household. The shots introduced the family and usually ended with Suzy peering out at us through her binoculars. What was she looking for? Now we know it was Sam. In a symmetrical epilogue, the camera revisits the rooms we saw at the start, only now Sam is in the house, working on a painting while Suzy reads. Sam slips out a window with the promise he will be back tomorrow. Blowing a kiss, Suzy uses her binoculars to watch Sam drive away with Sharp. Although their magical summer has ended, the princess in the tower has found her prince.

Playing with Form The film's flashbacks and character comparisons are reinforced by playful narration. The most apparent mark of this is the Narrator. Is he a character in the film's fictional world? At first, he seems an external commentator, like the Stage Manager in the play *Our Town*. As if introducing a documentary, he explains the geography and history of New Penzance (11.28). Yet he also knows the future, announcing that a 1965 storm will take place "in three days' time." His prediction sets up a deadline for the plot. Is he outside the film's story world? Not entirely, because he materializes in one scene to tell the adults that Sam has probably taken Suzy to the Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet. At the film's very end he reappears to explain how things turned out. In supplementary material online (at <http://insidemovies.ew.com/2012/06/07/moonrise-kingdom-animation>) he is said to be the town librarian, but that doesn't explain how he could know the future.

The Narrator's fussy, comic omniscience is matched by Anderson's habit of inserting written texts. Several letters pop up, with voice-over recitation by the writer. More oddly, when Sam seems doomed to go to a youth facility, we cut directly to a news article about an orphanage's Christmas celebration—the sort of wry link we might find in a film with associative form. Later Anderson interrupts a Khaki Scout's instructions with a shot of a "supply list"



11.28 A gnomish narrator. The Narrator introduces the island, in a shot that looks forward to Sam and Suzy's campsite.



11.29 Kids' games. Resembling a comic-book frame or a child's stick-on label, the inserted scissors image treats the Scouts' skirmish with Suzy and Sam as play rather than an act of violence.



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Anderson is not alone in his choices about framing and staging. We consider this "planimetric" approach more generally in "Shot-consciousness." Our entry, "*The Grand Budapest Hotel*: Wes Anderson takes the 4:3 challenge," considers how Anderson adapts his style to different aspect ratios.

“Usually when I'm making a movie, what I have in mind, first, for the visuals, is how we can stage the scenes to bring them more to life in the most interesting way, and then how we can make a world for the story that the audience hasn't quite been in before.”

—Wes Anderson



11.30 Dollhouse sets. In the opening sequence, the camera films the Bishops' household as if it were a cutaway scale model, with Suzy often revealed watching us through binoculars.

enumerating what they'll need to rescue Sam and Suzy. The extreme formality of this printed-out list, which was probably never actually created by the characters, gently mocks the quasi-military solemnity of the mission.

Probably the most startling interruption occurs when Sam and Suzy are attacked by the aggressive scout Redford. We don't see the actual fight, just some very rapid shots of an arrow in flight and of abstract images of scissors (11.29). Later we'll learn that Suzy has used her scissors to stab Redford. The sequence is presented as a fantasy re-creation of an actual tussle.

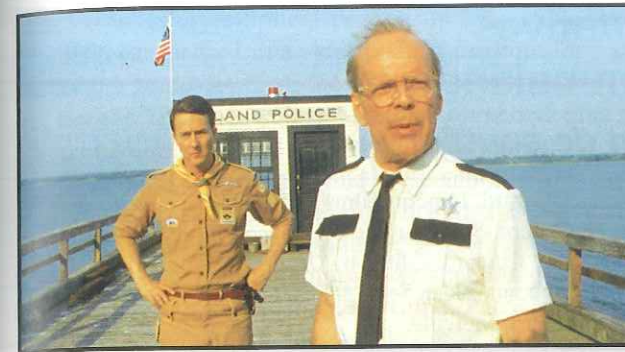
Rules for Style In choosing techniques, Anderson sets up rules that are stricter than those most filmmakers follow. He shoots rooms in straight-on views with central vanishing-point perspective (11.30). Sometimes the characters stand in profile, at 90 degrees to the camera. More often, figures stand facing us, like the Narrator (11.28), even when they are talking to others. They move straight toward or away from the camera, or at right angles to it. In other films, such as *The Royal Tenenbaums* and *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, Anderson has employed a similar style, but here it reinforces the fantasy aspect of the action. The characters might be figures in a simple comic strip or a *South Park* episode.

The limited options in staging and framing push Anderson toward other stylistic choices. To retain his right-angled treatment of space, he's obliged to use tracking and panning movements that are severely horizontal or vertical. Likewise, to accommodate his frontal staging, he treats the 180-degree system in an unusual way. He puts the camera directly on the axis of action, which enables him to cut between characters at opposite ends of it (11.31, 11.32). The film's distinctive style depends on choosing some rare options from the classical film-making menu.

Nearly all the dialogue scenes in the film are treated in this rigid, compass-point fashion. But there's one important exception: The development of Sam and Suzy's romance in the wilds is echoed by a gradual shift in the stylistic pattern (11.33–11.38). In a film that avoids the most common form of shot/reverse shot, Anderson uses it to give Sam and Suzy's encounter an intimacy that is denied the other characters.

The film's score is somewhat rule governed as well. It employs several Benjamin Britten pieces associated with youth. There is Britten's "Simple Symphony," based on tunes he wrote as a teenager, as well as *Noye's Fludde* and children's songs. Britten's *Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra* is heard at several points. It served as a model for Desplat's score, which is organized around seven variations on a theme, entitled "The Heroic Weather Conditions." Over the closing credits, this theme deliberately mimics *The Young Person's Guide* as Sam's voice introduces the instruments used in Desplat's orchestration.

Anderson saves one surprise for the end of the plot. During the afternoon at Mile 3.25 Tidal Inlet, Suzy reveals she doesn't like the place's name. Sam agrees and suggests they come up with another. We don't learn what name that is until the last shot. Sam's painting in Suzy's parlor is revealed to be a landscape of the inlet. The storm has filled it in, so it no longer exists, except in Sam's picture. He has painted the words "Moonrise Kingdom" on the beach. The title, recalling Suzy's fantasy novels, is a suitable name for a magical summer interlude that removed its characters, and its audience, from the everyday world.



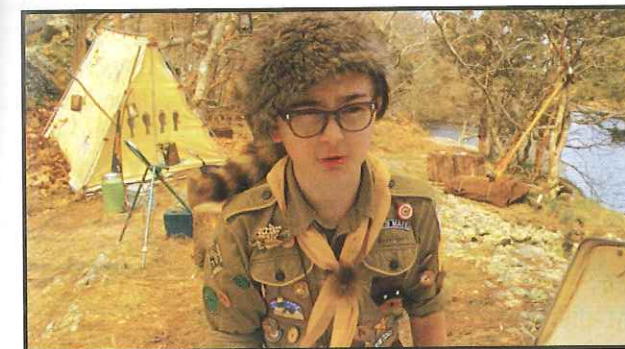
11.31–11.32 Camera on the axis. Anderson's version of shot/reverse-shot cutting puts the camera directly on the axis of action, so that characters look straight out at us. This doesn't violate the continuity system, but it's more typical of optical POV passages like those in *Rear Window* (pp. 241–242).



11.33



11.34



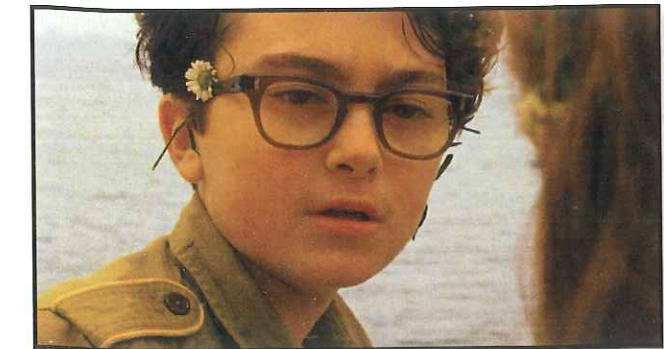
11.35



11.36



11.37



11.38

11.33–11.38 More and more normal. When Sam and Suzy first meet at *Noye's Fludde*, and when they reunite in the meadow, they are shot in Anderson's standard way. We get profile or head-on views (for example, 11.33, 11.34). As they get to know one another, the angles become more like the $\frac{3}{4}$ views we see in most films (11.35, 11.36). (Compare p. 237.) When they declare their love for each other, they are shown in conventional over-the-shoulder angles (11.37, 11.38). The stylistic development echoes Sam and Suzy's growing intimacy.

Narrative Alternatives to Classical Filmmaking

Breathless (À bout de souffle)

1960. Les Films Georges de Beauregard, Impéria Films and Société Nouvelle de Cinéma. Directed by Jean-Luc Godard. Story outline by François Truffaut, dialogue by Godard. Photographed by Raoul Coutard. Edited by Cécile Decugis. Music by Martial Solal. With Jean-Paul Belmondo, Jean Seberg, Daniel Boulanger, Henri-Jacques Huet, Van Doude, Jean-Pierre Melville.

In some ways, *Breathless* imitates a 1940s Hollywood staple, the **film noir**, or “dark film.” Such films dealt with hard-boiled detectives, gangsters, or ordinary people tempted into crime. Often a seductive femme fatale would lure the protagonist into a dangerous scheme (for example, *The Maltese Falcon*). *Breathless*’s plot links it to a common noir vehicle: the outlaw movie involving young criminals on the run, such as *They Live by Night* and *Gun Crazy*.

An Outlaw Couple? The bare-bones story could serve as the basis of a Hollywood script. A car thief, Michel, kills a motorcycle cop and flees to Paris to get money to escape to Italy. He also tries to convince Patricia, an American art student writer with whom he had a brief affair, to leave with him. After equivocating for nearly two days, she agrees. Just as Michel is about to receive the cash he needs, Patricia calls the police, and they kill him.

Yet Godard’s presentation of this story could never pass for a polished studio product. For one thing, Michel’s behavior is presented as driven by the very movies that *Breathless* imitates. He rubs his thumb across his lips in imitation of his idol Humphrey Bogart. But he is a petty thief whose life spins out of control. He can only fantasize himself as a Hollywood tough guy.

The film’s ambivalent attitude toward classical American cinema also pervades form and technique. As we’ve seen, the norms of classical style and storytelling promote narrative clarity and unity. In contrast, *Breathless* appears awkward and casual, almost amateurish. It makes character motivations ambiguous and lingers over incidental dialogue. Its editing jumps about frenetically. And, whereas film noirs were made largely in the studio, where selective lighting could swathe the characters in a brooding atmosphere, *Breathless* utilizes location shooting with available lighting.

These strategies make Michel’s story quirky, uncertain, and deglamorized. They also ask the audience to enjoy the film’s rough-edged reworking of Hollywood formulas. An opening title dedicates the film to Monogram Pictures, a Poverty Row studio that churned out B-movies. The title seems to announce a film that is indebted to Hollywood but not wholly bound by its norms.

Goals, Delays, and Puzzles Like many protagonists in classical Hollywood films, Michel has two main goals. To leave France, he must search for his friend Antonio, the only one who can cash a check for him. Michel also hopes to persuade Patricia to go with him. As the plot progresses, it becomes apparent that, despite his flippant attitude, Michel’s attraction to her outweighs his desire to escape.

In a classical film, these goals would drive the action along fairly steadily. Yet in *Breathless*, the plot moves in fits and starts. Brief scenes, some largely unconnected to the goals, alternate with long stretches of seemingly irrelevant dialogue. Most of *Breathless*’s 22 separate segments run four minutes or less. One 43-second scene consists simply of Michel pausing in front of a theater and looking at a picture of Bogart.

Scenes containing crucial action are sometimes brief and confusing. The murder of the traffic cop, the crucial event that makes Michel a hunted man, is

handled in a very elliptical fashion. In long shot, we see the officer approaching Michel’s car, parked in a side road. In medium long shot, Michel reaches into the car for the gun. After that, the action becomes fragmentary (11.39–11.42). So much has been left out that we can barely comprehend what is happening, let alone judge whether Michel shot deliberately or by accident.

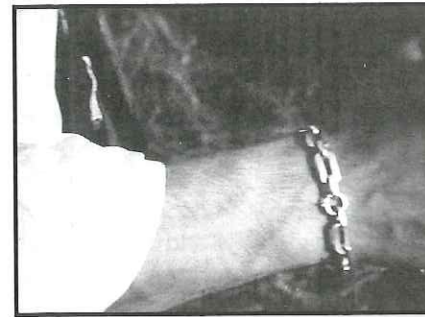
In contrast to the whirlwind presentation of this key action, a lengthy conversation in the middle of the film brings the narrative progression almost to a standstill. For nearly 25 minutes, Michel and Patricia chat in her bedroom. At some points, Michel attempts to further his goals, trying to phone Antonio and to persuade Patricia to come to Rome. Patricia suggests that she will not run off with him, because she does not know if she loves him. Michel: “When will you know?” Patricia: “Soon.” Michel: “What does that mean—soon? In a month, in a year?” Patricia: “Soon means soon.” So although the pair make love, by the end of the long scene (which occupies nearly a third of this 89-minute film), we still do not have a definite step forward or backward in Michel’s courting of Patricia, and he has made no progress toward escaping. Such scenes make him seem more like a wandering, easily distracted delinquent than the desperate, driven hero of a film noir.

You could argue that the bedroom scene functions not to advance the plot but to characterize the couple. Yet here too, nothing definite emerges. Most of the conversation is trivial, as when Michel criticizes the way Patricia puts on lipstick or when she asks whether he prefers records or the radio. The pair try to outstare each other, and they discuss Patricia’s new poster. So rambling is their exchange that some critics have assumed that the dialogue was improvised (although Godard attests that it was all scripted). Sam and Suzy, the runaway kids in *Moonrise Kingdom*, are far more focused in their desire to be together, and their conversations fill in their character traits to a degree we don’t find in the pillow talk of Michel and Patricia.

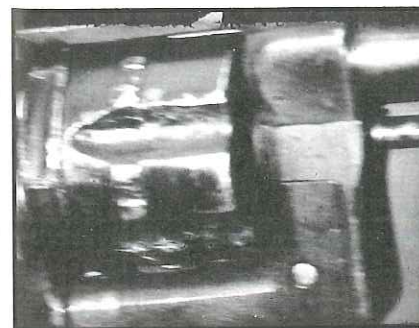
It’s not until the scene outside the *Tribune* office that another decisive action occurs. A passerby (played by Godard) recognizes Michel and tells



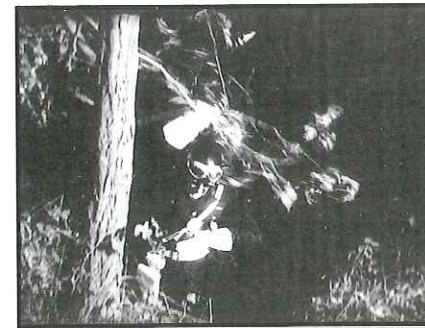
11.39



11.40



11.41



11.42

11.39–11.42 Temporal discontinuity for a murder scene. In *Breathless*, Michel’s shooting of the cop is fractured by abrupt cuts and camera movements. We see a close shot of his head, as the cop’s voice is heard saying, “Don’t move or I’ll drill you” (11.39). Two very brief close-ups pan along Michel’s arm and along the gun (11.40, 11.41), accompanied by the sound of a gunshot (though the pistol doesn’t seem to be firing). We then get a glimpse of the cop falling into some underbrush (11.42), followed by an extreme long shot of Michel, running far across a field.

the police. This triggers a chain of events that lead to Michel's death. Yet now the plot meanders once more. In the next scene, Patricia participates in a news conference with a famous novelist, a character unrelated to the main action. Most of the questions asked by the reporters deal with the differences between men and women, but the novelist's responses seem more playful than meaningful. Finally, Patricia asks him his greatest ambition, and he replies enigmatically: "To become immortal and then to die." Patricia's puzzled glance into the camera at the close of the scene prepares us for the ambiguity that will linger at the film's end.

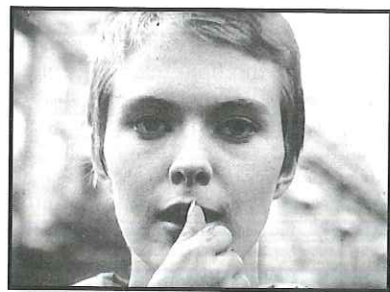
After Detective Vital questions Patricia at the *Tribune* office, she and Michel realize that the police are on his trail. Now *Breathless* begins to progress in a somewhat more conventional way. In the next scene, Patricia says that she loves Michel "enormously," and they steal a car. Here Michel seems to reach his romantic goal, as Patricia commits herself to fleeing with him. When Antonio agrees to bring the cash the next morning, Michel moves toward his second goal. We might anticipate possible outcomes: The pair will escape, or one or both will be killed in the attempt. The next morning, however, Patricia confounds our expectations by betraying Michel to Vital. Even then Michel has a last chance. Antonio arrives just before the police, with money and a getaway car—yet Michel cannot bring himself to leave Patricia.

More Questions The ending is particularly enigmatic. As Michel lies bleeding to death, Patricia looks down at him. He slowly makes the same playful faces at her that he had made during their bedroom conversation. Muttering, "That's really disgusting" ("C'est vraiment dégueulasse"), he dies. Patricia asks Detective Vital what he said, and Vital misreports Michel's last words: "He said, 'You are really a bitch'" ("Il a dit, 'Vous êtes vraiment une dégueulasse'"). We are left to ponder what Michel thought was disgusting—Patricia's betrayal, his own last-minute failure to flee, or simply his death. In the final shot, Patricia looks out at the camera, asks what *dégueulasse* means, rubs her lips with the Bogart-inspired gesture that Michel has used throughout the film (11.43), and abruptly turns her back on us as the image fades out.

Breathless achieves a degree of closure: Michel fails to achieve his goals. But we are left with many questions. Although Michel and Patricia talk constantly about themselves, we learn remarkably little about why they act as they do. Unlike characters in classical films, they do not have a set of clearly defined traits. The film begins with Michel saying, "All in all, I'm a dumb bastard," and in a way, his actions bear this out. Yet we never learn background information that would explain his decisions.

Patricia's traits and goals are even more uncertain. When Michel first finds her selling newspapers on the Champs Elysées, she is far from welcoming. Yet at the scene's end, she runs back to give him a kiss. She keeps saying she wants to get a job as a *Tribune* reporter and to write a novel, yet she seems to throw these ambitions away when she thinks she loves Michel. Patricia also tells Michel she is pregnant by him, but she has not received the final test results, and she never raises this as a reason she should stay in Paris. Her speech about why she informed on Michel seems not really to explain her abrupt change of heart. Just as Michel is ill suited to be a tough guy, Patricia is too naive and indecisive to play the role of the classic femme fatale.

In the outlaw film noir, the characters are intensely committed to each other, but Michel and Patricia seem to have few strong feelings about what they do. When the treacherous woman deceives the noir hero, he often becomes bitterly disillusioned; but Michel apparently does not blame Patricia for betraying him. It is as if these ambivalent, diffident, confused characters are unable to play out the desperately passionate roles that the Hollywood tradition has assigned to them.



11.43 Gesture as motif. Patricia's enigmatic gesture at the end of *Breathless* mimics the way Michel copies Humphrey Bogart.

Breaking with Tradition *Breathless*'s elliptical, occasionally opaque narrative is presented through techniques that are equally unconventional. As we have seen, Hollywood films use a three-point system of key light, fill light, and backlight, carefully controlled in a film studio (pp. 128–129). *Breathless* was shot entirely on location, even the interiors. Godard and cinematographer Raoul Coutard often decided not to add any artificial light in the settings. As a result, the characters' faces sometimes fall into shadow (11.44).

Filming on location, especially in small apartments, would ordinarily make it difficult to obtain a variety of camera angles and movements. But taking advantage of new portable equipment, Coutard was able to film while hand-holding the camera. Several lengthy tracking shots follow the characters (11.45). Coutard apparently rode in a wheelchair to film this shot, as well as more elaborate movements that follow the characters in interiors (11.46). Such shots recall the location shooting of many film noirs, such as the final airport scenes of Stanley Kubrick's *The Killing*, but the low camera position and the passersby who turn to look at the actors (as with the man at the right in 11.45) call attention to the technique in a way that departs from Hollywood usage.

Even more striking than the mise-en-scene is Godard's editing. Again he sometimes follows tradition, but at other points, he breaks away. Standard shot/reverse-shot cutting organizes several scenes (11.47, 11.48). Similarly, when Michel spots the man examining the telltale photo in the newspaper, Godard supplies correctly matched glances. Since this is a turning point in the plot, it's important that the audience understand that the man may recognize Michel, and so Godard adheres to the 180° line.

Yet the film also violates continuity editing, and in ways that are still jolting today. In the opening scene, as Michel's accomplice points out a car he wants to steal, the eyelines are quite unclear, and we get little sense of where the two are in relation to each other. Nor does Godard feel an obligation to respect screen direction (11.49, 11.50). Most original of all are his jump cuts. During the classic studio years, Hollywood editors avoided the jump cut, in which a segment of time is eliminated without the camera being moved to a new vantage point (p. 255–256). By contrast, *Breathless* employs the technique throughout. In an early scene, when Michel visits an old girlfriend, jump cuts shift their positions abruptly (11.51, 11.52).

Even when Godard shifts the camera position between cuts, he may drop out a bit of time or mismatch the actors' positions. At many cuts, the action seems to jerk forward. One effect of this jumpy editing is to enliven the rhythm. At times, as during the murder of the police officer, we have to be very alert to follow the action. The elliptical editing also makes other scenes stand out by contrast, particularly the single-take scenes with moving camera and the rambling 25-minute conversation in Patricia's apartment.

The film's sound often reinforces these editing discontinuities. When the characters' dialogue and other diegetic sounds continue over the jump cuts, we are forced to notice the contradiction: Time drops out of the visual track but not the sound track. The location shooting also creates situations in which ambient noises intrude on the dialogue. A passing siren outside Patricia's apartment nearly overwhelms her conversation with Michel during the long central scene. Later the press conference with Parvulesco inexplicably takes place on an airport observation platform, where the whines of nearby planes drown out the dialogue. Such scenes lack the balance of volumes of the well-mixed Hollywood sound track.

Godard's avoidance of the rules of smooth sound and picture steers *Breathless* away from the glamorous portrayals seen in the Hollywood crime film. The stylistic awkwardness suits the pseudo-documentary roughness of filming in an actual, hectic Paris. The discontinuities are also consistent with other nontraditional techniques, like the motif of the characters' mysterious glances into the camera. In addition, the jolts in picture and sound create a self-conscious narration that makes



11.44



11.45

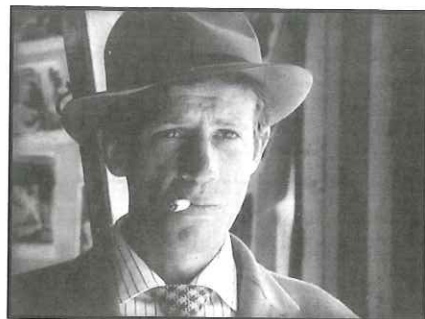


11.46

11.44–11.46 Available lighting and flexible camerawork. When Patricia sits against a window and lights a cigarette, the natural light of the scene illuminates her only from behind (11.44). Michel's first meeting with Patricia as she strolls along the Champs Elysées selling papers occurs in a three-minute take (11.45). Later, when Michel visits a travel agent trying to claim his check, the framing glides with ease as he moves through offices and corridors (11.46).

“On À Bout de souffle, he'd [Godard] ask the script-girl what kind of shot was required next to fulfill the requirements of traditional continuity. She'd tell him, and then he'd do the exact opposite.”

—Raoul Coutard, cinematographer



11.47



11.48



11.49



11.50

11.47–11.50 Editing, normal and disruptive. When Michel pauses in front of a movie theater and looks at a photo on display (11.47), Bogart seems to look back at him in reverse shot (11.48). At other times, Godard breaks the 180° rule. In the first shot, Patricia moves from left to right (11.49), but in the next, she is walking right to left (11.50). This cut flagrantly violates conventional screen direction.

the viewer aware of its stylistic choices. In making the director's hand more apparent, the film presents itself as a deliberately unpolished revision of tradition.

Godard did not set out to criticize Hollywood films. Instead, he took genre conventions identified with 1940s America and gave them a contemporary Parisian setting and a modern, self-conscious treatment. In the process he created a new type of hero and heroine. Aimless, somewhat banal lovers on the run became central to later outlaw movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Badlands*, and *True Romance*. More broadly, Godard's film became a model for directors who wished to create exuberantly offhand homages to, and reworkings of, Hollywood tradition. This attitude would be central to the stylistic movement that *Breathless* helped launch, the French New Wave. (See Chapter 12, pp. 479–482.)



11.51



11.52

11.51–11.52 The jump cut. During Michel's visit to an old girlfriend, we get several jump cuts. Compare the last frame of one shot (11.51) with the first of the next shot (11.52). We've seen another example earlier, when jump cuts show Patricia riding in a car (6.151, 6.152, again the last and first frames of adjacent shots).

Tokyo Story (Tokyo Monogatari)

1953. Shochiku/Ofuna, Japan. Directed by Yasujiro Ozu. Script by Ozu and Kogo Noda. Photographed by Yuharu Atsuta. With Chishu Ryu, Chieko Higashiyama, So Yamamura, Haruko Sugimura, Setsuko Hara.

We've seen that the classical Hollywood approach to filmmaking tends to let story action dominate. The plot is constructed to encourage us to build the story in our minds in a certain way. What do you show and when do you show it? The answer to these questions is usually based on how the filmmaker wants us to experience the story's action.

With so much emphasis on the story, we seldom pay particular attention to the space in which it occurs. The setting, and the manner of showing it to us, functions chiefly as an arena for character conflict and change. Spade's office in *The Maltese Falcon* (pp. 233–237) isn't explored as a locale, it's merely a nondescript area for initiating the mystery plot. *North by Northwest* doesn't want us to study Mount Rushmore as a piece of mammoth sculpture; it's rather a dramatic backdrop for a chase and cliff-hanging.

What, however, if a filmmaker wanted to change the way we thought about the space around a story? You wouldn't have to go as far as Michael Snow in *Wavelength* and almost obliterate a story altogether (pp. 207–209). You might try to tell a story, in fact a rather emotional one, but allow the locales in which the story takes place to gain more prominence, to claim our attention in their own right. Patterns of space could enrich the story while at the same time having a certain independence.

This all sounds a little abstract, so let's look at a famous example. The Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu has sought to tell gripping stories while also making narrative space more than a container for action. We've given you a preview of Ozu's unique style of exploring space through graphic matching (6.142–6.145) and using an area of space to condense story time (5.207, 5.208). Through such choices, Ozu created a systematic alternative to classical continuity filming (p. 254). Our analysis here tries to show how his strategies operate across an entire film.

Oblique Storytelling *Tokyo Story*, Ozu's first film to make an impression on Western audiences, presents a simple narrative. An elderly provincial couple visit their grown children in Tokyo, only to be treated as nuisances. As the couple return home, the wife falls ill, and she dies after reaching their house. Now the children come to visit the parents, and though some are sorrowful, others continue to be emotionally distant. The plot lacks the goals, conflicts, crises, and climaxes that we associate with Hollywood cinema. In outline, it seems merely a sad anecdote.

What makes this tale more complex, and our responses more nuanced, is Ozu's handling. *Tokyo Story*'s narration is, by classical standards, rather oblique. Sometimes we learn of important narrative events only after they have occurred. For example, although the grandparents are the film's central characters, we do not see the grandmother falling ill. We hear about it only when her son and daughter get telegrams with the news. Similarly, the grandmother's death occurs between scenes. In one scene, her children are gathered by her bedside; in the next scene, they are mourning her.

Yet these ellipses are not evidence of a fast-paced film such as *His Girl Friday*, which tries to cover a lot of narrative ground in a hurry. On the contrary, the sequences of *Tokyo Story* often linger over details: the melancholy conversation between the grandfather and his friends in a bar as they discuss their disappointment in their children, or the grandmother's walk on a Sunday with her grandchild. The result is a shift in narrative balance. Big narrative events are played down by means of ellipses, whereas narrative events that we do see in the plot are ones that would be considered minor.



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Ozu is one of our favorite directors. Apart from the book *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema* (an e-book linked on our site), you can read about him in "A modest extravagance: Four looks at Ozu" and "Watch again! Look well! Look! (For Ozu)."

Transitional Spaces As Ozu shifts our attention away from the most dramatic events, he often steers us away from dramatically significant space. Scenes don't begin and end with shots showing the most important elements in the mise-en-scene. Instead of the usual transitional devices, such as dissolves and fades, Ozu typically employs a series of separate transitional shots linked by cuts. A landscape or object becomes the pivot to a new scene. In effect, Ozu makes bits of setting fill in the time gaps between scenes. This already gives greater weight to the space around the story action.

Moreover, these transitional shots often show spaces not directly connected with the action of the scene; the spaces are usually *near* where that action will take place. The opening of the film, for example, has five shots of the port town of Onomichi—the bay, schoolchildren, a passing train—before the sixth shot reveals the grandparents packing for their trip to Tokyo. Although a couple of important motifs make their first appearances in these first five shots, no narrative causes occur to get the action underway. (Compare the openings of *His Girl Friday* and *North by Northwest*.)

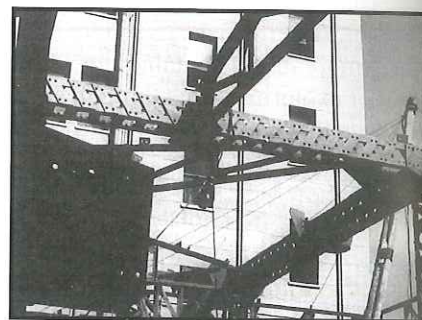
These transitions have only a minimal function as establishing shots. In fact, sometimes they mislead us about what's coming next. At a crucial moment in the drama, the narration moves from the daughter-in-law Noriko to the clinic of the eldest son, yet Ozu can extend the transition with shots of a construction site (11.53–11.56). The shots of the building under construction aren't necessary to the action, and we get no hint of where the building is. We might assume that it is outside Noriko's office, but the riveting sound we hear in the transitional shots isn't audible in the interior shots before and after.

“I don't think the film has a grammar. I don't think film has but one form. If a good film results, then that film has created its own grammar.”

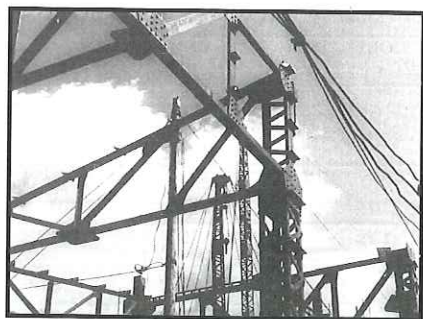
—Yasujiro Ozu, director



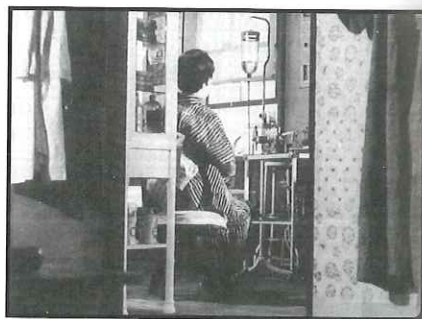
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11.54



11.55



11.56

11.53–11.56 Ambivalent transitions in *Tokyo Story*. After the daughter-in-law, Noriko, gets a phone call at work telling her of the grandmother's illness, the scene ends in a medium shot of her sitting pensively at her desk. The only diegetic sound is the loud clack of typewriters (11.53). A nondiegetic musical transition comes up in this shot. Then there is a cut to a low-angle long shot of a building under construction (11.54). Riveting noises replace the typewriters, with the music continuing. The next shot is another low angle of the construction site (11.55). A cut changes the locale to the clinic belonging to the eldest son, Dr. Hirayama. The sister, Shige, is present. The music ends and the new scene begins (11.56).

What are the functions of these stylistic patterns? It's hard to assign them explicit or implicit meanings. For example, someone might propose that the transitional shots symbolize the new Tokyo that is alien to the visiting grandparents from a village reminiscent of the old Japan. But often the transitional spaces don't present outdoor locales, and some shots are within the characters' homes. Moreover, why insert these shots here rather than anywhere else in the film, where the same thematic opposition would be just as appropriate? And finally, if the shots reiterate the old/new theme, they would be quite redundant, because the contrast between the grandparents' tradition and their children's urban lives is already stressed in the story action.

A more systematic function, we suggest, is narrational, having to do with the flow of story information. Ozu's narration alternates between scenes of story action and inserted portions that lead us to or away from them. As we watch the film, we start to form expectations about these wedged-in shots. Ozu emphasizes stylistic patterning by creating anticipation about when a transition will come and what it will show. The patterning may delay our expectations and even create some surprises.

For example, early in the film, Mrs. Hirayama, the doctor's wife, argues with her son, Minoru, over where to move his desk to make room for the grandparents. This issue is dropped, and there follows a scene of the grandparents' arrival. This ends on a conversation in an upstairs room. Transitional music comes up over the end of the scene. The next shot frames an empty hallway downstairs that contains Minoru's school desk, but no one is in the shot. There follows an exterior long shot of children running along a ridge near the house; these children are not characters in the action. Finally, a cut back inside reveals Minoru at his father's desk in the clinic portion of the house, studying.

Here the editing creates a very indirect route between two scenes, going first to a place where we expect a character to be (at his own desk) but isn't. Then the scene moves completely away from the action, outdoors. Not until the third shot does a character reappear and the action continue. Likewise, after we leave Noriko at her typewriter (11.53) and see the building under construction, we might expect to move to another office building. Instead, the next shot takes us to the family's suburban home. The construction site is neither fully urban (the building is unfinished), nor rural either. In its in-between status we can see it, in retrospect, as a conceptual link between Noriko and the clinic. In these transitional passages, a kind of game emerges. Ozu asks us to form expectations not only about story action but about editing and setting. Just as Ozu's plotting is unpredictable, leaving major actions offscreen and elevating minor ones, so too is his film's movement through space and time.

The Space around the Characters Ozu finds another way to activate the space his characters inhabit. We mentioned in Chapter 6 (p. 255) that he creates a 360° space for many of his scenes. He will cut across the 180° line to frame the scene's space from the opposite direction. This, of course, violates rules of screen direction, since characters or objects on the right in the first shot will appear on the left in the second, and vice versa. He's not doing this occasionally, as Ford does in our *Stagecoach* example (6.94, 6.95), but consistently. The editing in Shige's beauty salon exemplifies Ozu's typical approach to framing and editing a scene (11.57–11.59).

When we look closely, we find that Ozu has his own rules for staging, shooting, and cutting, and these revise the continuity guidelines. He relies on eyeline cuts, but these are often “wrong” by Hollywood standards, since both characters are looking in the same direction (11.60, 11.61). He matches on action but shifts back and forth across the axis of action, as when Noriko and her grandmother walk toward the door of Noriko's apartment (11.62, 11.63). Instead of restricting his camera



11.57



11.58



11.59

11.57–11.59 360° editing space. At the beginning of a scene in Shige's beauty salon, the initial interior medium shot frames Shige from opposite the front door (11.57). A 180° cut reveals a medium long shot of a woman under a hair dryer; the camera now faces the rear of the salon (11.58). Another 180° cut presents a new long shot of the room, again oriented toward the door, and the grandparents come into the salon (11.59).

positions to one side of the axis of action, Ozu cuts in a full circle around the action, usually in segments of 90° or 180°. This means that backgrounds change drastically, as in our examples. In a Hollywood film, the camera rarely crosses the axis of action to look at the fourth wall. Because surroundings change more frequently in *Tokyo Story*, they become more prominent in relation to the action; the viewer must pay attention to setting or become confused.

This 360° space works together with the transitional shots that prolong or thwart the viewer's expectations. One of the most famous scenes in the film shows the grandparents visiting a spa at Atami, sent there because they inconvenience their offspring. Even though they enjoy looking at the sea, their nights are disturbed by partyers around them. Ozu introduces us to their unhappiness gradually and without sentimental pathos. For seven shots, the film slowly explores the space of



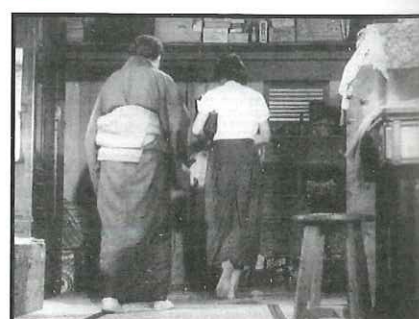
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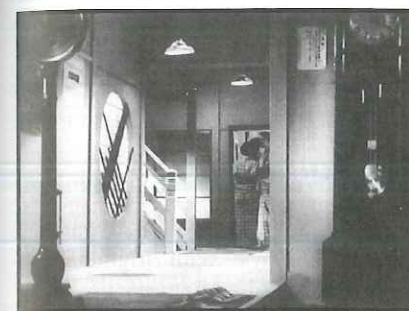


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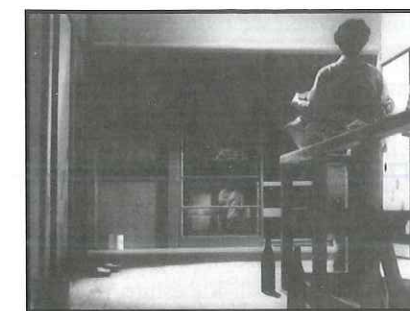
11.60–11.63 360° space breaks the axis of action. The grandfather and his old friend converse, but they look in the same direction (11.60–11.61). Adherents of classical continuity would say that this cut implies that the two men are looking off at something else, yet we aren't confused by it. Similarly, Noriko and her grandmother advance to the camera, then away from it (11.62–11.63). The women's movements are closely matched, and normally head-on and tail-on shots of action can cut together. (See 6.89–6.93.) But here the similar framings make the characters seem to bump into themselves. Their screen positions, left and right, are also abruptly reversed, something that is usually considered an error in the continuity style.

the scene, gradually letting us discover the situation (11.64–11.71). The presence of the couple's slippers in the second shot (11.65) is almost unnoticeable. It hints that the grandparents are there, but the revelation of their whereabouts is then put off for several more shots as the shots sidle through other rooms in the spa. The unpredictability of the scene's unfolding is created through the transitional shots and the 360° shifts.

In these ways, Ozu draws our attention away from the strictly causal functions of space and makes space important in its own right. He does the same with the flat space of the screen by cutting to highlight graphic configurations. Now we can see that his strategy of 360° cutting also functions to create strong graphic matches between shots. (Look back at 11.60 and 11.61, and you'll see the same sort of graphic matching we pointed out in 6.142–6.145.) The stylistic device is



11.64



11.65



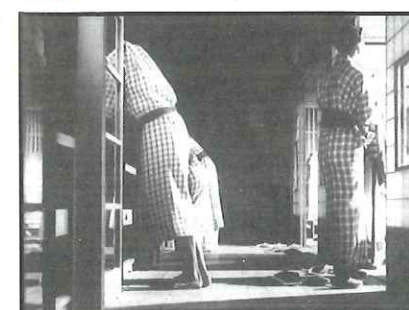
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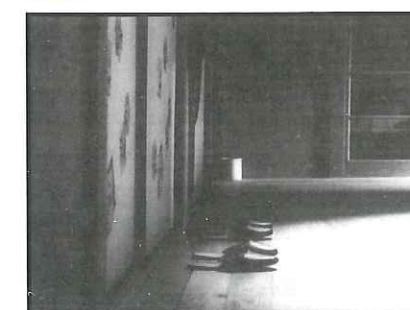
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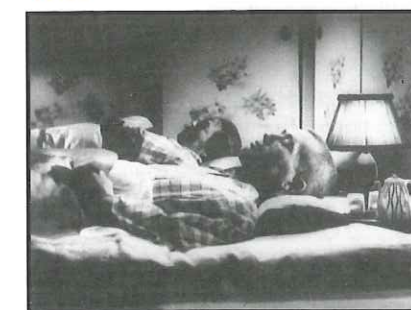
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11.71

11.64–11.71 Sidling into a scene. The Atami spa scene begins with a long shot along a hallway (11.64). Latin-style dance music plays offscreen, and several people walk through the hall. The next shot (11.65) is a long shot of another hallway upstairs, with a maid carrying a tray; two pairs of slippers are just visible by a doorway at the lower left. But instead of taking us into the room with the grandparents, Ozu takes us to a hallway (11.66) and then a mah-jongg game nearby (11.67). Ozu cuts 180° across the axis, framing another mah-jongg table (11.68). The first table is now in the background, viewed from the opposite side. So will the scene's action take place here among the mah-jongg players? The next cut returns to the medium long shot along the courtyard hallway (11.69). Finally, there is a medium shot of the two pairs of slippers by the door in the upper hallway (11.70), suggesting that this is the grandparents' room. A medium shot of the Hirayamas in bed, trying to sleep through the noise, finally reveals the narrative situation (11.71). Only now do the Hirayamas start to talk.

characteristic of Ozu, who seldom uses the graphic match for any narrative purpose. In this respect, Ozu's style owes something to abstract form (see Chapter 10, pp. 371–378). It's as if he sought to make a narrative film that would make graphic similarities as evident as they are in an abstract film like *Ballet mécanique*.

Ozu's narration may not seem as suspenseful as Hitchcock's or as eccentric as Godard's. His dwelling on the spaces around the characters may seem less economical than Spike Lee's concise creation of a city block in *Do The Right Thing*.

His style resembles the frontal staging and cutting we see in Wes Anderson's *Moonrise Kingdom*. It's possible that Anderson was influenced by Ozu. But Ozu's framing and cutting show us more angles on his characters. Anderson also seems more interested in the spaces behind his characters, while Ozu emphasizes the areas around them. In other words, Ozu suggests that around his characters, behind them, alongside them, exist places and people that have their own integrity and interest. Moreover, by asking us to form expectations about what areas of the setting we will see next, he draws us into an experience that involves more than building up the story. Just as when we read a novel we can appreciate a lyrical paragraph of description as well as a conflict among characters, Ozu takes us beyond the immediate action and shows that patterns of cinematic space can be enjoyed in their own right.

Chungking Express (Chung Hing sam lam)

1994. Jet Tone, Hong Kong. Directed by Wong Kar-wai. Script by Wong Kar-wai. Photographed by Andrew Lau Wai-keung and Christopher Doyle. With Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, Takeshi Kaneshiro, Tony Leung Chiu-wai, Faye Wong Jingwen.

Filmmakers in many countries have sometimes explored what has been called the *web-of-life plot* or the *network narrative*. Instead of two primary lines of action, as in *His Girl Friday* or *North by Northwest*, some recent films weave together a large number of plotlines, often involving many characters. American precedents for this can be found in *Grand Hotel* (1932) and *Nashville* (1976), but in the 1990s, such films as *Short Cuts*, *Pulp Fiction*, *Magnolia*, *Traffic*, *Babel*, and *Love Actually* made this sort of plotting more common. Unlike the characters of *Do The Right Thing*, who all live in the same neighborhood, the characters in a web-of-life plot start out unknown to one another. Eventually, however, they are likely to converge, revealing unexpected causal connections. In *Magnolia*, disparate as the characters are, they are connected either to the television producer Earl Partridge or through chance encounters, as when the police patrolman meets Partridge's unhappy daughter.

The audience expects a network narrative to reveal unforeseen relations among the disparate characters. Seen from this standpoint, *Chungking Express* constitutes an intriguing experiment in nonclassical form. It is broken into two distinct stories, each organized around a different batch of characters. The two stories aren't cross-cut but simply set side by side. What has director Wong Kar-wai accomplished by putting these two stories in the same film?

Two Sad Policemen In the first tale, Officer 223 (for ease of recall, we'll call him Officer 1) has just broken up with his girlfriend and lives in hope that she'll take him back before May 1, his 25th birthday. Wandering the city at night, he runs into a mysterious woman in dark glasses and a blonde wig. He doesn't know that she is part of a drug-smuggling outfit. She has hired some Indian down-and-outs to carry bags of cocaine out of the country, but they have defected with the drugs. She must recover the shipment or face the wrath of her boss, who runs a bar. Officer 1 meets her in a bar and takes her to a cheap hotel, where she sleeps off her drinking and he eats snacks. In the morning, he leaves her. She posts an affectionate message on his pager before returning to the bar and shooting her boss dead.

The second and longer tale introduces Officer 633 (Officer 2), who is happy with his girlfriend, a flight attendant. But one day she leaves him. He is still trying

to get over their affair when Faye, a counterwoman at his favorite fast-food spot, the Midnight Express, takes an interest in him. The flight attendant leaves Officer 2's keys at the Midnight Express snack bar for him to retrieve, and Faye uses them to explore his apartment while he's out. She tidies it up and redecorates it, leaving fresh soap and towels and filling his aquarium with fish. After catching her in the apartment, he realizes she's flirting with him. They make a date. But she stands him up, leaving for California—the place she had always hoped to visit. A year later, Officer 2 has bought the Midnight Express and is renovating it when Faye returns. Now *she's* a flight attendant, and there is a hint that their romance might finally begin.

What links the two parts? Both employ handheld camera work, moody music, and voice-over commentaries drifting in and out. But common stylistic choices aren't normally enough to justify putting two stories together. Since both protagonists are policemen, we might expect them to encounter one another, but they never do; the first is a plainclothes detective, while the second pounds a beat. Nor does the mysterious blonde's drug smuggling ever impinge on the cops' activities. Officer 1 is ignorant of her racket, and Officer 2 doesn't investigate the murder of the bar owner, as he might in another kind of plot. The two strands do share one locale: Both Officer 1 and Officer 2 hang out at the Midnight Express. Nonetheless, this doesn't connect the parts causally, since Officer 1 meets Faye only once, and he never becomes a rival for her affections. As if to tease sharp-eyed repeat viewers, Wong inserts into the first part a brief, distant shot of each main character who will appear in the *second* part—Officer 2, the flight attendant, and Faye (11.72). But they are unknown to us the first time we see the film, and they aren't presented as shaping the story action in the first part.

It is as if Wong has juxtaposed the two stories in such a way to demand that we find our own connections between them. By analyzing narrative form and style, we can bring to light some intriguing similarities and differences, which in turn point to a set of themes that unify the film.

Two Times, Two Places In broad narrative terms, the two parts stand in sharp contrast. The first takes place on the Kowloon peninsula of Hong Kong, in and around Chungking Mansions, a decaying block of cheap guest quarters, shops, and Indian restaurants. (The Cantonese title of the film translates as “Chungking Jungle,” and it may tease the local viewer into believing that eventually the second story will return to this neighborhood.) The second part takes place on Hong Kong Island, across the bay from Kowloon, in the vicinity of the Midnight Express. The Kowloon of part one teems with crime; Officer 1 chases suspects down at gunpoint, while the blonde works for a drug cartel. Part two presents a far less threatening world, where romance can blossom and the cop on the beat drops in for snacks. The English-language title of the film fuses the basic locales of each part, balancing Chungking Mansions with Midnight Express in a single phrase.

The two parts offer very different time schemes as well. The first part takes place over a short span, about four days, and the action labors under deadlines. Officer 1 has given May, his ex-girlfriend, the month of April to come back to him. The blonde's deadline for the smuggling operation has been set by her boss, and she meets it by shooting him and escaping from Hong Kong on May 1. The second part has a much looser time frame and no strong deadlines. Over a period of weeks, Officer 2's girlfriend leaves him, Faye invades his apartment, he transfers his beat, and after a series of casual encounters they finally make a date. Faye stands up Officer 2 and, like the blonde woman, departs. The action concludes a year later when she flies back to Hong Kong.



11.72 Passing unawares. In *Chungking Express*, while the mysterious blonde woman lounges outside a shop, Faye (whom we do not meet until part two) leaves with a stuffed toy (perhaps destined for Officer 2's apartment). Each of the three main characters of part two is glimpsed during the first story.

“[Financiers in Asia] always ask, ‘Is it a cop story or a gangster story?’ So you have to choose. One or the other. . . . So with *Chungking Express*, I said it is a cop and a gangster story. We have gangsters, and we have cops. But it is not a gangster/cop story. It's just about their lives, and that's it.”

—Wong Kar-wai, director

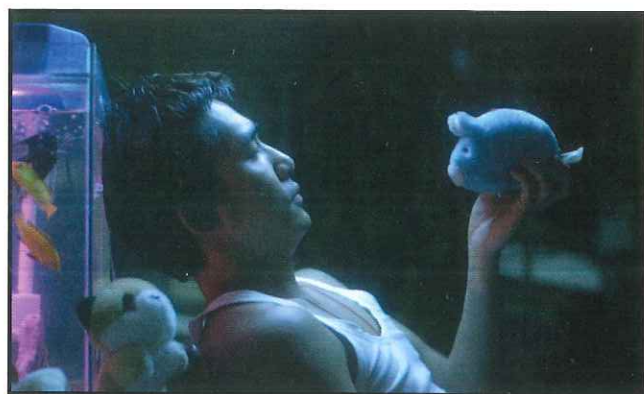


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For an analysis of a Wong Kar-wai martial-arts movie, see “The *Grandmaster*: Moving forward, turning back.”



11.73



11.74

11.73–11.74 Policemen wounded by romance. Wong uses parallel images to show Officer 1 and Officer 2 moping in their apartments.

Yet within these broad contrasts, some echoes do emerge. Each man is coming out of a love affair; each meets a woman by chance; quickly or slowly, the man becomes attached to her; the woman abruptly departs. The characters' goals are also revealing. Officer 1 seeks a new woman to love, and although Officer 2 is content to drift, Faye seems to try to ease his bruised heart. These goals are presented more vaguely and pursued more erratically than in a Hollywood film, but the parallels suggest that *Chungking Express* revolves around romance. The more closely we look at cause-effect chains, motifs, and visual style, the more evidence we find that the film is comparing ways in which people try to find love.

The two policemen's romantic problems shape their attitudes toward time. Neither man realizes that love affairs must adjust to change. In part one, ruled by fast pace and deadlines, Officer 1 has been pining for a month and now wants to find a new girlfriend immediately. Officer 2, suddenly dumped by his flight-attendant girlfriend, can't summon up the energy to restart his love life. Both men fill their stretches of waiting with cycles of repetitive behavior. Officer 1 badgers May's family and then calls old girlfriends to ask for a date. Officer 2 repeatedly visits the Midnight Express, first to pick up snacks for himself and his girlfriend, then simply to brood. Although one wants a sudden adventure and the other falls back on routine, both are caught in spirals of inactivity. Wong emphasizes this through parallel images of each man moping in his apartment (11.73, 11.74).

Food and Flight The two cops need a change—according to the film's most pervasive motif, a change of menu. Food is central to both stories, announced at the start in the headlong tracking shots through Chungking Mansions, where the snack stalls are filled with eaters. May loved pineapple, so Officer 1 measures the time he waits for her in pineapple cans, each day buying one with a May 1 expiration date. On the last day, when she hasn't returned to him, he gorges himself on the 30 cans he has saved. When he meets the blonde, he asks if she likes pineapple. Similarly, Officer 2 always orders chef's salads at the Midnight Express.

The men stick with one food, but the women crave varied menus. As the blonde studies Officer 1 in the bar, her voice-over commentary remarks, "Knowing someone doesn't mean keeping them. People change. A person may like pineapple today and something else tomorrow." When Officer 2 brings home pizza and fish and chips, his girlfriend leaves him. He muses that she realized that she had a choice of lovers as well as dinners.

The food motif goes on to define the men's attitudes toward change. While the blonde sleeps in a Chungking Mansions hotel room, Officer 1 stuffs himself with hamburgers, salads, and fries. Once outside, he thinks that she has forgotten him, but her pager message ("Happy birthday") leads him to wish that the expiration date on his memory of her will last forever. No longer treating a girlfriend as a fast-food snack, Officer 1's sense of time has expanded. Instead of seeking a new future, he treasures a moment in the past (11.75).

As the counter girl Faye invades Officer 2's life, she replaces his cheap tinned fish with another brand, spikes his water jug to help him sleep, and pushes him out of his self-pity (in which he imagines his towel crying and his soap wasting away). When she skips their date, she leaves him a fake boarding pass she inks



11.75



11.76

11.75–11.76 Messages in the rain. After his morning run, Officer 1 gets the pager message wishing him a happy birthday (11.75). Officer 2 had discarded the mock boarding pass Faye left him. Now, in a comparable framing to 11.75, he waits for it to dry so he can read it (11.76).

onto a napkin. At first he discards it, but then, in a composition paralleling that of Officer 1's meditation on his pager message, he dries it in a snack-shop rotisserie (11.76). A year later, Officer 2 has embraced a varied menu. He has bought the Midnight Express, and when Faye returns, he persuades her to write him a new boarding pass. Before he had been reluctant to travel with her, but now, when she asks where he wants to fly, he replies, "Wherever you want to take me." He has broken out of routine and is ready for a change.

This last scene sums up another motif, airplane flight, that runs through both parts and marks parallels. Air travel is associated with the women's desire for change. In the first part, the blonde prepares her drug mules for a trip, and she flees her crime by taking an early plane out. In the second part, Officer 2's air hostess is replaced by Faye (11.77). Musical motifs also signal the importance of change. The repeated reggae song in the first part states, "It's not every day that's gonna be the same way, there must be a change somehow." The second part highlights the song "What a Difference a Day Makes" and the Mamas and Papas' "California Dreamin'," which expresses a wish to leave for sunnier surroundings. Several pictorial motifs parallel the two main women, including their shoes, their dark glasses, and their habit of slipping into reverie (11.78, 11.79).

Crime Thriller or Romantic Drama or Both? If the film's primary theme is the need to accept change as part of love, then the two parts are cunningly designed to lead us toward it indirectly. The first part opens with the blonde hurrying through Chungking Mansions, then shows Officer 1 racing after a criminal and colliding with her before moving on. Her femme fatale disguise and the drug deal suggest that this is the start of a crime thriller (see pp. 332–334). But soon the smuggling situation is overwhelmed by Officer 1's romantic yearnings. The blonde woman's abrupt shooting of her boss ends the crime line of action. The second tale begins, and Officer 2's placid routine and personal problems take over. The thriller elements have served largely as bait, luring us to study the characters before the plot switches genres and becomes an open-ended romantic drama.

Wong signals the genre shift through a stylistic parallel. At the start of the film, as Officer 1 collides with the blonde, the frame freezes, and in voice-over he says, "Fifty-seven hours later I fell in love with this woman." At the end of the first part



11.77 Replacement women. When Faye first meets the woman who dumped Officer 2, she secretly measures herself against her. At the end of the film, Faye will become a flight attendant herself.



11.78

11.78–11.79 Musing women. The blonde woman of part one (11.78) strikes a posture similar to that of Faye in part two (11.79).



11.79

Officer 1 revisits the Midnight Express, and he bumps into Faye (11.80). His commentary remarks, “Six hours later . . .” The image fades out and fades in on Officer 2 approaching the snack bar (11.81), and we hear Officer 1 continue, “. . . She fell in love with another man.” We will never see Officer 1 again. These voice-over remarks (highly implausible on grounds of realism—how could Officer 1 know that Faye falls in love with Officer 2?) mark the film’s romantic parallels explicitly.



11.80



11.81

11.80–11.81 Freeze-frames and voice-overs. Part one of *Chungking Express* ends with Officer 1 bumping into Faye at the Midnight Express (11.80). Part two begins with Officer 2 approaching the Midnight Express; he will replace Officer 1 as the film’s male protagonist (11.81). Both parallels are marked by Officer 1’s voice-over commentary.

Since the plotlines in the two parts aren’t linked causally, the film may at first disappoint the viewer’s expectations. Why don’t the couples meet? Wong did entertain the possibility of having all four main characters converge at the airport, but he decided to give us something a little more challenging. By keeping the two stories separate, he forces us to seek thematic connections. The parallel situations point to the idea that change is as necessary to love as variety is to diet. The thematic implications are reinforced by mise-en-scene, cinematography, music, and voice-over commentary. Yet *Chungking Express* isn’t heavy-handed, partly because it slides cleverly from crime movie to stop-and-start romance, and partly because it invites us to appreciate its playful artifice.

Documentary Form and Style

Man with a Movie Camera (*Chelovek s kinoapparatom*)

Made 1928, released 1929. VUFKU, Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Directed by Dziga Vertov. Photographed by Mikhail Kaufman. Edited by Elizaveta Svilova.

Man with a Movie Camera might seem to be a straight reportorial documentary; it surveys a day in the life of Russian society. The day-in-the-life documentary format has been a sturdy one, right up to *One Day on Earth* (2011). But Dziga Vertov’s approach is more experimental. His film is as much a celebration of cinema as it is a portrait

of his country’s life. Vertov will try to show that documentary film goes beyond simply recording its subjects. Thanks to editing and cinematography, along with associational form, a multitude of tiny scenes from everyday reality becomes an exploration of the power of moviemaking.

A City Symphony *Man with a Movie Camera* belongs to a genre of documentaries that became important during the 1920s: the *city symphony*. There are many ways of making a film about a city, of course. One might use categorical form to lay out its geography or scenic attractions, as in a travelogue. Rhetorical form could make arguments about problems in city planning or government policies that need changing. A narrative might stress a city as the backdrop for many characters’ actions, as in Rossellini’s *Rome Open City* or Jules Dassin’s semidocumentary crime drama *The Naked City*. Early city symphonies, however, established the convention of taking candid (or occasionally staged) scenes of city life and linking them, usually without commentary, through associations to suggest emotions or concepts. Associational form is evident in such early examples of the genre as Alberto Cavalcanti’s *Rien que les heures* (1926) and Walter Ruttmann’s *Berlin, Symphony of a Great City* (1927). Godfrey Reggio’s *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) use of associational principles to create moods and evoke concepts about contemporary urban life ties it to the city-symphony tradition. (See pp. 379–386.)

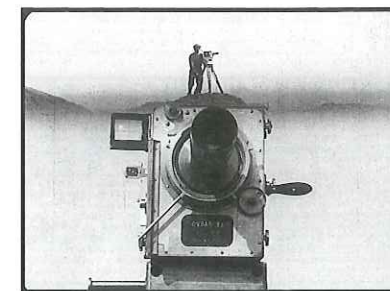
In *Man with a Movie Camera*’s opening, we see a camera operator filming, then passing between the curtains of an empty movie theater and moving toward the screen. Then we see the theater opening, the spectators filing in, and the orchestra preparing to play. The screening starts. The film that we and the audience watch seems at first to be a city symphony laying out a typical day in the life of a town (as Ruttmann’s *Berlin* does). We see a woman asleep, mannequins in closed shops, and empty streets. Soon a few people appear, and the city wakes up. Indeed, much of *Man with a Movie Camera* follows a rough principle of development that progresses from early morning through work time to leisure time.

But early in the waking-up portion, we also see the cameraman again, setting out with his equipment, as if starting his workday. This action creates the first of many deliberate inconsistencies. The cameraman now appears in his own film, and Vertov emphasizes this by cutting back immediately to the sleeping woman who had been the first thing we saw. From the start, this city symphony announces it will also be a cinema-symphony, a film dedicated to the process of creating a film.

Cinematographer as Hero The very title *Man with a Movie Camera* emphasizes the fact of filmmaking. Vertov was a keen advocate of editing; in Chapter 6 (p. 225), we quoted a passage in which he equated the filmmaker with an eye, gathering shots from many places and linking them creatively for the spectator. Vertov’s theoretical writings also compare the eye to the lens of the camera, in a concept he termed the “kino eye.” (*Kino* is the Russian word for “cinema,” and one of his earlier films is called *Kino-Glaz*, or *Cinema-Eye*.)

Man with a Movie Camera takes this idea—the equation of the filmmaker’s eye with the lens of the camera—as the basis for associational form. The film becomes a demonstration of cinema’s power to control our perception of reality through editing and special effects. The opening image shows a camera in close-up. Through a double-exposure effect, we see the cameraman of the film’s title suddenly climb, in extreme long shot, onto the top of the giant camera (11.82). He sets up his own camera on a tripod and films for a bit and then climbs down again. This play on shot scale within a single image emphasizes at once the power the cinema has to alter reality in a seemingly magical way.

Cinematographic special effects of this sort appear as a motif throughout the film. These are not intended to be unnoticeable, as in a science fiction film. Instead, they flaunt the fact that the camera can alter everyday reality (11.83).

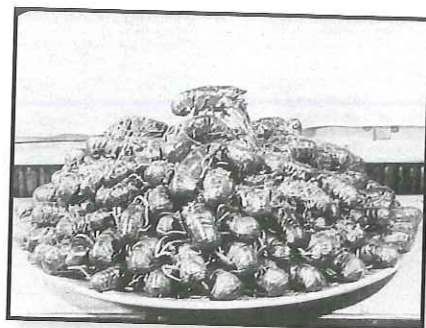


11.82



11.83

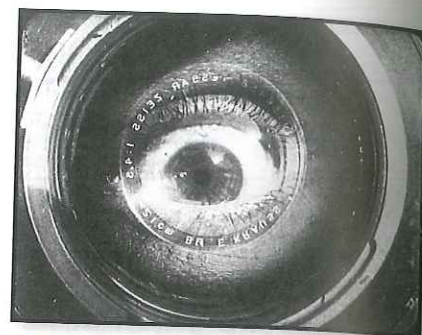
11.82–11.83 The hero and his superpowers. Vertov’s regular cinematographer, Mikhail Kaufman, played the cameraman in *Man with a Movie Camera* (11.82). Kaufman alters an ordinary street scene by exposing each side of the image separately, with the camera canted in opposite directions (11.83).



11.84

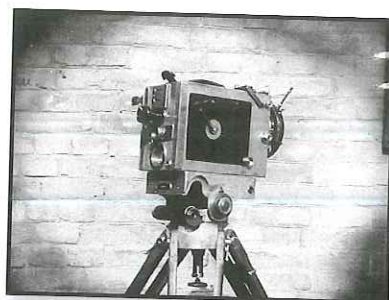


11.85

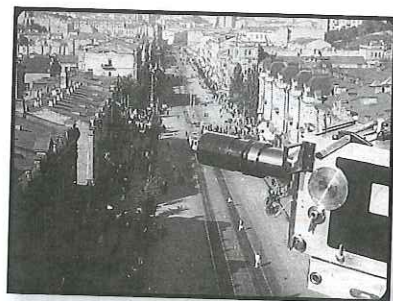


11.86

11.84–11.86 Surpassing reality through special effects. Thanks to pixillation, a crayfish dances (11.84). Vertov conveys the sound of a radio by superimposing images of a dancer and of a hand playing a piano against a black background (11.85). *Man with a Movie Camera* ends with an eye superimposed over the camera lens, staring out challengingly (11.86).



11.87



11.88

11.87–11.88 Camera as all-powerful machine. The animated camera crawls out of its box, climbs onto the tripod, and demonstrates how its various parts work (11.87). A climactic shot uses an extraordinary deep-focus composition to show the camera scanning the city (11.88).

Later Vertov uses pixillation to animate objects and superimpositions to evoke sound (11.84, 11.85). The virtuosic special effects culminate in the famous final shot (11.86). Cinema's powers make the filmmaker something of a superhero.

At several points in the film, the camera is also personified, associated by editing with the actions of human beings. One brief segment shows the camera lens focusing, followed by a blurry shot of flowers coming into sharp focus. This is followed immediately by a comic juxtaposition rapidly intercutting two elements: a woman's fluttering eyelids as she dries her face with a towel and a set of venetian blinds opening and closing. Finally, another shot shows the camera lens with a diaphragm closing and opening. A human eye is like venetian blinds, just as the lens is like an eye—all can admit or block out light. Later, pixillation allows the camera to move by itself (11.87) and finally then to walk off on three legs. The machine has become human, and the human has become a machine.

The opening has laid out the whole process of documentary filmmaking, from shooting through editing to projection in a theater. Throughout *Man with a Movie Camera*, we see an action being filmed, then edited, then viewed by the onscreen audience, though not always in this neat order. Later Vertov intercuts shots of the cameraman filming from a motorcycle with shots of the audience in the theater watching the footage. In the final portions of the film, motifs from earlier parts of the day return, many now in fast motion. The chronological order of the ordinary city symphony is broken and jumbled. Vertov creates an impossible time scheme, once more emphasizing the extraordinary manipulative powers of the cinema.

The film also refuses to show only one city, instead mixing footage filmed in Moscow, Kiev, and Odessa, as if the cameraman hero can move effortlessly across the USSR during this “day” of filming. Vertov's view of the cinema's relation to the cityscape is well conveyed in one shot that makes the camera loom over distant buildings (11.88). The camera conquers all. *Man with a Movie Camera* is a city symphony, but it goes beyond the genre as well.

Social Criticism and Self-Advertisement Apart from its exuberant celebration of the powers of cinema, Vertov's film contains many explicit and implicit meanings. Explicitly, the film seeks both to praise and to criticize aspects of Soviet society a decade after the Revolution.

Many of the film's juxtapositions involve machines and human labor. Under Stalin, the USSR was beginning a major push toward industrialization, and the mechanized factories are portrayed as fascinating places full of bustling movement (11.89). The camera operator scales a huge factory smokestack or swings suspended over a dam to capture a new society being built. Workers are

presented as participating cheerfully in the country's growth, as when one young woman laughs and chats as she folds cigarette boxes on an assembly line.

Vertov also points out weak spots in contemporary life, such as lingering class inequalities. Shots in a beauty shop suggest that some bourgeois values have survived the Revolution, and the leisure-time sequence near the end contrasts workers involved in outdoors sports with chubby women exercising in a weight-loss gym.

Vertov also takes pains to criticize drunkenness, a major social problem in the USSR. One of the first shots within the inner film shows a derelict sleeping outdoors, juxtaposed with a huge bottle advertising a café. A shop front that we repeatedly see advertises wine and vodka, and later there is a scene where the cameraman visits this bar. When he leaves, we see shots of workers' clubs, converted from former churches. Associational crosscutting contrasts these two places where workers can spend their leisure time: A woman shooting at targets in one of the clubs seems to be shooting away bottles of beer that, thanks to stop-motion, disappear from a crate in the bar.

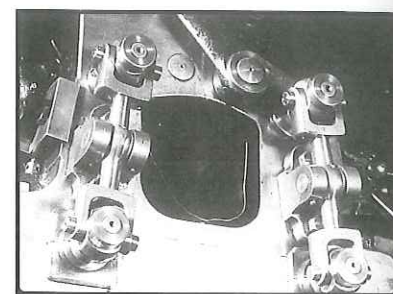
During the 1920s, government officials sought to steer Soviet citizens away from taverns and churches and toward film theaters and workers' clubs. (Since the government's biggest source of income came from its monopoly on vodka sales, the policy also aimed at making film a major alternative source of revenue.) *Man with a Movie Camera* seems to be subtly promoting this policy by using playful camera techniques to make both movie houses and clubs seem attractive.

Implicitly, *Man with a Movie Camera* can be seen as an argument for Vertov's approach to filmmaking. He opposed narrative form and the use of professional actors, preferring that films use camera technique and editing to create their effects on the audience. He was not, however, entirely against controlling the mise-en-scene, and several scenes, particularly the woman waking up and washing, clearly were staged. On the whole, the film is a sort of demonstration of what path Vertov thought cinema should take.

Vertov strengthens his case by associating making a film with other sorts of productive labor. The camera operator goes to his job in the morning, like other workers. Like them, he uses a machine; editing compares the camera's crank with the crank on a cash register and with moving parts on factory equipment. And the filmmaker is dedicated. He accepts dangerous missions, climbing up a huge smokestack, crouching on the tracks to film an oncoming train, riding a motorcycle one-handed as he cranks the camera to capture a race. Even when other workers are relaxing at the beach or at sporting events, the cameraman is on the job.

As the cameraman's work is compared with running factory machines or taking on hazardous missions, editing is seen as a patient craft. The editor whom we see cutting the footage is Elizaveta Svilova, Vertov's wife and the actual editor of *Man with a Movie Camera*. Her gestures of scraping the film and dabbing cement to make a splice are crosscut with shots of a manicure in a beauty parlor. More generally, across the film we see the same shots in different contexts: on our screen, on the screen within the movie theater, in fast-motion, or in freeze frame. We see shots filmed, snipped apart, spliced together. We must therefore view these images not only as moments of recorded reality but also as pieces of a whole put together through the painstaking efforts of film workers like Svilova. The film becomes a sort of machine to be assembled and tuned to perfection by expert hands. Filmmaking is a job, not an elite-oriented art, and it has a useful role in building the new society.

Judging from the delighted reactions of the audience we see in the theater, Vertov hoped that the Soviet public would find his celebration of filmmaking educational and entertaining. This hope went unfulfilled. During the late 1920s, Soviet authorities wanted films that would be easily understandable and would convey propagandistic messages to a far-flung, often illiterate, populace. Policy makers were increasingly critical of filmmakers such as Sergei Eisenstein and Vertov, whose films, though celebrating revolutionary ideology, were extremely



11.89 The glamor of the machine. Framing and lighting enhance the dynamism of throbbing, gleaming machine parts.

complex. In Chapter 6, we saw how Eisenstein adopted a dense, discontinuous style of editing. While Vertov disagreed with Eisenstein, particularly over the latter's reliance on narrative form, both belonged to a larger stylistic movement called Soviet Montage, whose history we examine in Chapter 12 (pp. 470–473). Both filmmakers used very complex editing that they hoped viewers would learn to enjoy.

With its contradictory time scheme and rapid editing (it contains over 1,700 shots, more than twice what most Hollywood films of the same period had), *Man with a Movie Camera* is a difficult film, especially for an audience unaccustomed to the conventions of Montage filmmaking. Over the next few years, Soviet authorities increasingly criticized Vertov and his colleagues, limiting their ability to experiment with concepts like the kino-eye. Vertov was constrained in his later projects, but *Man with a Movie Camera* eventually came to be recognized around the world as a sophisticated documentary, a classic experiment in associational form, and an uninhibited display of the power of cinematic technique.

The Thin Blue Line

1988. An American Playhouse production (PBS). Directed by Errol Morris.
Photographed by Stefan Czapsky, Robert Chappell. Edited by Paul Barnes.
Music by Philip Glass.

On a west Dallas highway one night in 1976, a police officer named Robert Wood was fatally shot by a driver he had pulled over. Wood's partner, officer Teresa Turko, saw the killer drive off, but it took months of investigation for the police to discover that the car had been stolen by David Harris. Harris, a 16-year-old from the small town of Vidor, admitted to being in the car but said that the killer was Randall Adams, a man with whom he had hung around that day. Adams was tried for murder, found guilty, and sentenced to death. Eventually, through an appeal process, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. Harris, because of his age and his cooperation with the police, was given a suspended sentence.

In 1985, documentary filmmaker Errol Morris met Randall Adams while he was researching another project. Morris became convinced that Adams had been unjustly convicted, and over the next three years, he prepared a film based on his investigation of the case.

The Thin Blue Line employs narrative form, telling the story of events leading up to and following the murder of Officer Wood. Yet the film's narration enriches that basic story. By juggling time, inserting many details, developing the reenactments of the killing into a powerful pattern, and subtly engaging our sympathy for Randall Adams, Morris not only takes us through a criminal case but also suggests how difficult the search for truth can be.

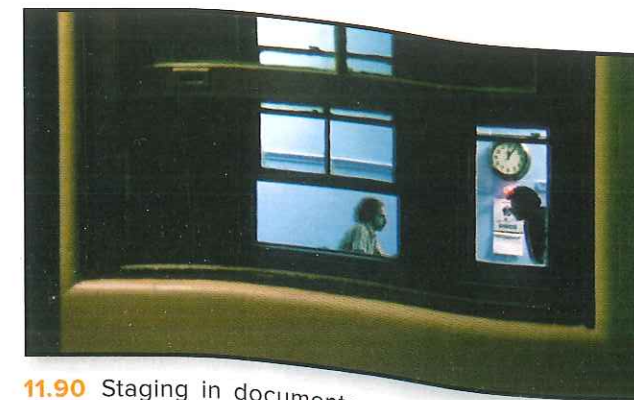
Parts and Wholes The overall plot guides us through the story events, but not in a wholly linear way. For this reason, it's useful to draw up a segmentation of the film. We can find 31 fairly distinct sequences, although many contain brief flashbacks to the interrogation and the crime. Some also contain fairly lengthy reenactments, which are signaled here by italics.

- C. Opening credits
1. Dallas, Randall Adams, and David Harris are introduced.
2. Officer Wood is shot. *First shooting reenactment*
3. Adams is arrested and interrogated. *First interrogation reenactment*
4. Police describe the interrogation and the beginning of the investigation. *Second interrogation reenactment*
5. Police describe the two officers' states of mind. *Second shooting reenactment*
6. Police search for the car, even using hypnotism. *Third shooting reenactment*

7. Big break: David Harris is discovered in Vidor, Texas.
8. Harris accuses Randall Adams of the shooting.
9. Adams responds to Harris's charge.
10. Adams is interrogated. *Third interrogation reenactment*
11. Police explain the mistaken auto identification.
12. Adams's two lawyers are introduced and describe their inquiry into Harris's hometown.
13. Adams's lawyers discuss Harris as a criminal; the judge describes his attitude toward police.
14. Adams recounts Harris's version of events. *Fourth shooting reenactment*
15. Adams explains his alibi.
16. Trial: Officer Turko testifies, implicating Adams. *Fifth shooting reenactment*
17. Trial: New witnesses emerge. Mr. and Mrs. Miller claim to have seen Adams shoot Wood. *Sixth shooting reenactment*
18. Adams's lawyers and Mrs. Carr rebut the Miller couple's testimony.
19. Trial: Third new witness, Michael Randell, claims to have seen Adams shoot Wood. *Seventh shooting reenactment*
20. Trial: Jury declares Adams guilty.
21. Trial: Judge sentences Adams to death.
22. Adams reacts to the death sentence.
23. Adams's lawyers petition for a retrial and lose.
24. Adams's appeal is supported by the U.S. Supreme Court; his sentence is commuted to life in prison.
25. Vidor detective explains: Harris is arrested again.
26. Rethinking the case: Witnesses reflect, and Harris hints that he has lied. *Eighth shooting reenactment*
27. Vidor detective explains: Harris has committed a murder in town.
28. Adams: "The kid scares me"; he reflects on the mistake of letting Harris go free.
29. Harris, now on death row, reflects on his childhood.
30. Final interview on audiotape: Harris calls Adams a "scapegoat" and virtually confesses.
31. Title: Current situation of the two men.
- E. Closing credits.

Segments 1–3 form a prologue, introducing the essential information and arousing our curiosity and concern. The opening sequence presents the city of Dallas; the two main characters, Randall Adams and David Harris; and their current situation: both men are in jail. What has brought them there? They tell of meeting each other and spending the day drinking, smoking marijuana, and going to a drive-in movie. Segment 2 is the first of many shocking reenactments of the shooting of Officer Wood at the dark roadside. Here, as in all the others, actors play the participants, and the framing often conceals their faces, concentrating instead on details of action or setting. The third sequence depicts Adams's arrest and interrogation (11.90).

Then the film's plot flashes back to explain events leading up to Adams's arrest, concentrating on the police investigation (segments 4–11). In the course of this, David Harris names Randall Adams as the killer (8), and Adams is arrested and interrogated (10). Eventually, the confusion about the make of the car is cleared up, though Morris hints that the police investigation was muddled (11). These sequences are interrupted by two more reenactments of Adams's questioning and two reenactments of the death of Officer Wood.



11.90 Staging in documentary. *The Thin Blue Line*: The questioning of Randall Adams, staged so that it is clearly a

“I wanted to make a film about how truth was difficult to know, not impossible to know.”
—Errol Morris, director

The longest stretch of the film (segments 12–24) centers on Randall Adams's confrontation with the courts. After his lawyers and the judge are introduced (12–13), we're given two conflicting versions of events—Adams's and Harris's (14–15). Three surprise witnesses identify Adams as the shooter (16–19), although some of the testimony is undercut by a woman who claims that two witnesses bragged to her about trying to earn a reward (18). Again, at certain moments the crime is reenacted to illustrate witnesses' testimony. The jury finds Adams guilty (20), and he's sentenced to death (21–22). The legal maneuvers that follow put Adams in prison for life without parole (23–24).

The film has answered one question posed at the outset. Now we know how Randall Adams got to prison. But what of David Harris, who is also serving time? The final stretch of the film continues the story after the trial, concentrating on Harris's criminal career. Harris is arrested for other crimes (25), and Morris inserts a sequence (26) designed to suggest his guilt in the Wood case. The surprise eye-witnesses are shown to be unreliable and confused, and as having things to hide. Most tellingly, Harris explains, “Of course I picked out Randall Adams.” In the next sequence, a detective in Harris's hometown of Vidor explains how Harris invaded a man's home, violently abducted his girlfriend, and fatally shot the man (27). Harris, now revealed as a polite, easygoing sociopath, reflects on his childhood, when his brother drowned and his father seemed to become more distant (29). But whatever sympathy he might arouse is undercut by his final acknowledgment, captured by Morris on audiotape, that Randall Adams is innocent (30). A title explains that Adams is still serving his life sentence, while Harris is on death row (31).

Complicating the Plot In outline, then, this is a straightforward tale of crime and injustice. The film's explicit meaning was compelling enough to trigger a new inquiry into the case, and Adams was freed in 1989. But Morris's film is more than a brief for the defense. It demands a great deal of the viewer; it does not spell out its message in the manner of most documentaries. We tend to side with Randall Adams and to distrust the police, prosecutors, and “eyewitnesses” aligned against him, but Morris does not explicitly favor Adams and criticize the others. The film's form and style shape our sympathies rather subtly. At another level, the film denies the viewer many of the usual aids for determining what happened on that night in 1976. Instead, it asks us to heighten our attention, to concentrate on details, and to weigh the incompatible information we are given. Morris's detective story asks us to reflect on the obstacles to arriving at the truth about any crime.

The film's materials are for the most part the stuff of any true-crime report. Morris uses talking-head interviews, newspaper headlines, maps, archival photos, and other documents to present information about the crime. He also includes reenactments of key events, signaled as such. Nonetheless, other documentary conventions are missing. There is no voice-over narrator explaining the situation, and no captions identify the speakers or provide dates. The reenactments don't carry the “Dramatization” caption seen in television documentaries. As a result, we're forced to evaluate what we see and hear without help. This extra responsibility is intensified by a framing that is rare in most documentary interviews: Several of the speakers look straight out at the camera, a tactic that forces us to weigh the testimony we hear (11.91).

Moreover, the use of paper documents is fairly cryptic: The film doesn't always specify their source, and the extreme close-ups often show only fragments of text. (One shot of a news article frames these partial phrases: “. . . ved to be a 1973 . . . earing Texas licens . . . with the letters H . . .”) Likewise, Philip Glass's repetitive score is hardly conventional documentary music, especially for a true-crime story. With its mournful, unresolved harmonies and nervously oscillating figures, the music arouses tension, but it also creates an eerie distance from the action: It throbs on, unchanged whether it accompanies an empty city landscape or a violent murder.

Other formal and stylistic qualities complicate the plot. For example, when an interviewee mentions a particular place, Morris tends to insert a quick shot of that

locale (11.92). So many abrupt interruptions wouldn't appear in a normal documentary, since they don't really give us much extra information. It's as if Morris wants to suggest the vast number of tiny pieces of information that an investigator must process. Similarly, during most of the reenactments, people's faces aren't shown. Instead, the scenes are built out of many close-ups: fingers resting on a steering wheel, a milkshake flying through the air in slow motion, a popcorn machine (11.93). Again, Morris stresses the apparently trivial details that can affect our sense of what really happened on the highway.

By amplifying apparently minor details he also invites us to see some of these shots metaphorically. Carefully composed and lit in high-key, the details become evocative motifs. Some inserts comment ironically on the situation (11.92). Others, such as the ever-present clocks and watches, indicate the ominous passing of time. Even the slowly shattering flashlight and the milkshake dribbling onto the pavement suggest the life pumping out of the fatally wounded officer Wood.

Reenactments and Revelations Morris subtly orchestrates our attitudes toward the people presented in the film. By and large, the plot is shaped to create sympathy for Randall Adams. He is the first person we see, and Morris immediately makes him appealing by letting him explain that he was grateful to find a good job soon after coming to Dallas. “It's as if I was meant to be here.” Morris presents him as a decent, hardworking man railroaded by the justice system. The interrogation of Adams is associated with filled ashtrays, making him seem nervous and vulnerable (11.94), as do the repeated close-ups of newspaper photos of his frightened eyes. When the accusers state their case, Morris keeps us on Adams's side by letting him rebut them. In segment 9, Adams replies to Harris's charge that he was the shooter; in segment 15, Adams presents his alibi in reply to Harris's claims about the time frame of events. By the end, Adams becomes the authoritative commentator. In segment 28, after Harris has committed another murder, Adams reminds us that a life could have been saved if the Dallas police hadn't released Harris. At this point, our sympathies for Adams are strong, and we understand why he reverses his initial judgment on Dallas: It's now “hell on earth.”

Our acceptance of Adams's account is subtly reinforced by the many reenactments of the murder. They are clearly set off as reconstructions by their use of techniques more closely associated with the fiction film, particularly film noir (11.95; also 4.63). They also distinguish themselves from the restagings shown on true-crime television shows, which tend to include the faces of actors and which are usually shot in a loose, handheld style suggesting that we are witnessing the real event.

The reenactments present different versions of the crime in accord with different witnesses' recollections. By presenting contradictory versions of what happened that night, Morris may seem to be suggesting that everyone involved saw things from his or her own perspective, and so there is no final fact of the matter. But the overall progression of the film leads us to a likely conclusion: that David Harris, on his own, killed Wood. Rather than suggesting that truth is relative, the incompatible reconstructions dramatize the conflicting testimony. Like jurors or courtroom spectators, we have to decide on the most plausible version, and the plot develops the reenactments in a strongly suggestive pattern.

In the segments devoted to the police investigation, the restagings emphasize matters of procedure. Did Officer Turko identify the car correctly? No, the police detectives eventually decide; but both before and after they arrive at this conclusion, Morris shows us two different cars, making the uncertainty visually concrete. Another question is just as important: Did Turko back up Officer Wood according to procedure, or did she remain in the car? Morris dramatizes both possibilities, but he leads us to infer that she probably was inside the car drinking her milkshake, since in the crime scene sketch, spilled chocolate liquid was found near the car. It is a matter of probabilities, and we can never be certain; but on the evidence we are given, we infer that she probably did not back up Wood.



11.92



11.93



11.94

11.92–11.94 Minor details as motifs. Morris cuts away to the motel where Adams stayed; in light of Adams's fate, the billboard in the background becomes ironic (11.92). A popcorn machine at the drive-in ominously fills the foreground, while the clock serves as the basis for David Harris's testimony (11.93). While Harris the teenager is associated with popcorn, Adams the panicked victim is associated with an ashtray full of cigarettes (11.94).



11.95 An echo of film noir. In a reenactment, Officer Wood is shown approaching the car.



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Real-life mysteries come in many forms. The magicians Penn and Teller track a man who tried to penetrate a great painter's secrets. We consider the result in “I am a camera, sometimes: *Tim's Vermeer*.”



11.91 Address to the viewer. A police detective gives his version of Adams's interrogation in a somewhat unnerving direct address.



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For more on Errol Morris's approach to documentary, see the entry "Errol Morris, boy detective."

The reenactments of Officer Wood's murder in the investigation section concentrate on police procedure, but during the trial section, the reenactments suggest different versions of what was happening in the killer's car. Was David Harris ducking down in the front seat? Was Adams's bushy silhouette mistaken for a fur-lined coat collar? When the surprise witnesses are introduced, Morris shows reenactments that present their cars passing the murder scene. Again, the reconstructions present the alternatives neutrally, but some become more plausible than others, especially once the eyewitnesses are rebutted by other testimony or betrayed by their own evasive answers.

The last reenactment, presented in the section devoted to David Harris, shows how Harris could have committed the murder, and significantly, it is accompanied by his voice virtually confessing to it. Now, after many other reenactments, this one is presented as most worthy of our belief. Morris carefully refrains from saying explicitly that Harris was the killer. But the development of the reconstructions, eliminating the most questionable versions and focusing more and more on the identity of the driver, pushes us toward accepting this as the likeliest account.

Digressions and Motifs As in any narrative film, then, the manner of storytelling, the play with narration and knowledge, shapes our attitudes toward the characters. By letting Adams comment on other characters, and by arranging the reenactments so as to point eventually toward David Harris's guilt, the film aligns us with Randall Adams, the innocent victim. Correspondingly, Morris uses other stylistic devices to make us mistrust the forces set against Adams. The film doesn't present the Dallas law officers as brutal villains, though. All are soft-spoken and articulate, and Judge Metcalfe comes across as calm and patient. But Morris's editing decisions give prominence to Adams's account and allow him to answer their charges, so we're inclined to appraise their words cautiously.

Morris comes closest to criticizing the authorities at two points. Both are semi-comic digressions relying on the sort of associational form exploited by *Koyaanisqatsi* (pp. 379–386). Judge Metcalfe reminisces about the death of John Dillinger (11.96, 11.97) and supplies background trivia about the woman who betrayed Dillinger. When he says she was sent back to her native Romania, Morris cuts to a map of Bucharest, as if that were as relevant to Adams's case as the Texas maps used elsewhere in the film. A similar bit of mocking humor appears when one eyewitness says that she always imagined herself as a girl detective in 1950s TV shows. Morris lets her voice-over commentary run during a clip from a B-film in which a young woman helps a detective capture a crook. These sequences suggest that Adams's adversaries hold a conception of crime fighting derived from popular movies.



11.96

11.96–11.97 Romanticizing the war on crime. Judge Metcalfe recalls that he grew up with a great respect for law and order because his father was present when FBI agents shot the gangster John Dillinger (11.96). Morris cuts to a scene from a Hollywood crime movie that presents Dillinger's death, an ancestor of the reenactments in *The Thin Blue Line* (11.97).



11.97

The color motifs that evoke police authority and duplicity are subtler. A motif of redness links Dallas and the police as forces aligned against Adams, and it suggests an explanation for why in the opening title credit, the word *Blue* is lettered in red (11.98–11.100). The film's title is taken from Judge Metcalfe's reference to the prosecutor's summation, in which he called the police the "thin blue line" between civilization and anarchy. By changing the color of the word, Morris not only evokes bloodshed, but he links the police blue to the ominous blinking red lights of the opening.

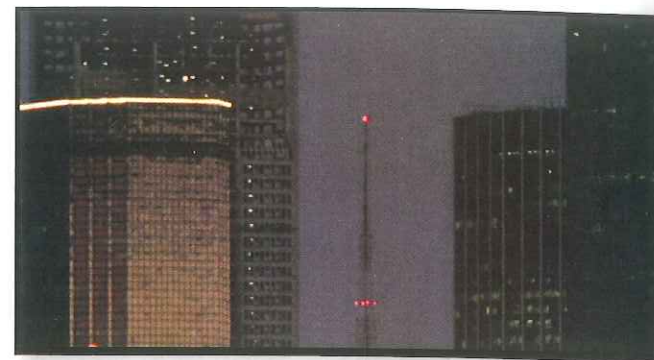
The motif expands further into Judge Metcalfe's account of the death of Dillinger, who was betrayed by the notorious "woman in red." Metcalfe claims that in fact she wasn't actually wearing red; her orange dress merely looked red in a certain light. David Harris, throughout his interviews in the film, is shown wearing an orange prison uniform, suggesting that he is another figure of betrayal and perhaps hinting at his relationship to the red of the police-car light. As a documentarist, Morris probably didn't dictate what outfit Harris wore, but he did create other images that emphasize the color motif, and he did decide to retain Metcalfe's irrelevant remarks about the woman in red. Like many documentarists, Morris highlights certain aspects of his footage to bring out thematic implications.

The story of Randall Adams's unjust imprisonment is presented as an intersection of several people's lives. Instead of simplifying the case for the sake of clarity, Morris treats it as a point where many stories crisscross—the private lives of the eyewitnesses, the professional rivalries among lawyers, the Dillinger tale, TV crime dramas, scenes from the drive-in movie that Adams and Harris attended. Any crime, the film suggests, will be a tangle of threads. Any crime will seem buried in an avalanche of details (license numbers, car makes, spilled milkshakes, TV schedules), and it will engender many alternative scenarios about what really happened. *The Thin Blue Line* builds the complications and dead ends inherent in an investigation into its very structure and style. The narration grants each version of the shooting some time onscreen, but Morris finally guides us to eliminate the implausible ones. He dwells on trivial details, but finally discards certain ones as less important. And he shows that a crime's complex mass of testimony and evidence can be sorted out. The film presents itself as both an account of what really happened on that Texas highway and a meditation on how persistent inquirers can eventually arrive at truth.

Form, Style, and Ideology

Meet Me in St. Louis

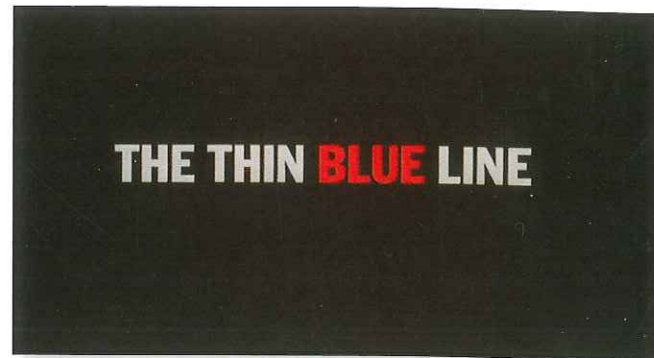
1944. MGM. Directed by Vincente Minnelli. Script by Irving Brecher and Fred F. Finklehoffe, from the book by Sally Benson. Photographed by George Folsey. Edited by Albert Akst. Music by Hugh Martin and Ralph Blane. With Judy Garland, Margaret O'Brien, Mary Astor, Lucille Bremer, Leon Ames, Tom Drake.



11.98



11.99



11.100

11.98–11.100 The motif of redness. The first few shots of the film show skyscrapers and other structures, each with a single blinking red light (11.98). After a cut to Randall Adams beginning his tale, the screen goes dark, and we see the rotating red light of a police car, an image that will recur elsewhere in the film (11.99). The film's title, with a crucial word colored red (11.100).

“I don’t shoot elegant pictures. Mr. Vincente Minnelli, he shot elegant pictures.”

—Billy Wilder, director, *Sunset Blvd.*

Just over halfway through *Meet Me in St. Louis*, Alonzo Smith announces to his assembled family that he has been transferred to a new job in New York City. “I’ve got the future to think about—the future for all of us. I’ve got to worry about where the money’s coming from,” he tells the dismayed group. These ideas of family and future, central to the form and style of the film, also create an ideological framework within which the film gains impact.

All the films we’ve analyzed could be examined for their ideological standpoints. Any film combines formal and stylistic elements in such a way as to create an ideological stance, whether overtly stated or tacit. We’ve chosen to stress the ideology of *Meet Me in St. Louis* because it provides a clear example of a film that doesn’t seek to change people’s ways of thinking. Instead, it tends to reinforce certain aspects of a dominant social ideology. In this case, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, like most Hollywood films, seeks to uphold what are conceived as characteristically American values of family unity and home life.

No Place Like Home *Meet Me in St. Louis* is set during the preparations for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, with the fair itself becoming the culmination of the action. The film displays its form in a straightforward way, with a title card identifying each of its four sections with a different season (11.101). In this way, the film simultaneously suggests two aspects of time: the movement toward the spring 1904 fair, which will bring the fruits of progress to St. Louis, and the unchanging cycle of the seasons. The seasonal structure allows the film to show the Smiths at the traditional times of family unity, the holidays; we see them celebrating Halloween and Christmas. At the end, the fair becomes a new sort of holiday, the celebration of the Smiths’ decision to remain in St. Louis.

The opening of the film quickly introduces the idea of St. Louis as a city on the boundary between tradition and progress. The fancy candy-box title card for summer forms a vignette of white and red flowers around an old-fashioned black-and-white photo of the Smiths’ house. As the camera moves in, color fades into the photo, and it comes to life (11.102). Slow, subdued chords over the title card give way to a bouncy tune more in keeping with the onscreen movement. Horse-drawn beer wagons and carriages move along the road, but an early-model automobile (a bright red, which draws our eye) passes them. Already the motif of progress and inventions becomes prominent; it will develop quickly into the emphasis on the upcoming fair.

As Lon Smith, the son, arrives home by bicycle, a dissolve inside to the kitchen launches the exposition. The Smiths are a large, close-knit family, and we’re introduced to each character as they go through a round of household activities and pass the song “Meet Me in St. Louis” from one to another. Thanks to close matches on action, the image track yields a flow of movement that presents the house as full of bustle and music (11.103). When Grandpa hears offscreen voices singing the same song, he moves to a window, and Esther’s arrival brings the sequence full circle back to the street outside the house (11.104).

The house remains the main image of family unity throughout most of the film. Most of the film’s plot takes place in or near the Smith house. Although Mr. Smith’s job provides the reason to move to New York, we never see him at his office. In the opening sequence, the family members return home one by one, until they all gather around the dinner table. Every seasonal section of the film begins with a similar candy-box title card and a move in toward the house. In the film’s ideology, the home appears to be a self-sufficient place; other social institutions become peripheral, even threatening.

At the center of this idealized household stand the women. The narration is organized around Mrs. Smith, the oldest daughter Rose, the youngest daughter Tootie, and in particular Esther. Moreover, women are portrayed as the agents of stability. The action in the story constantly returns to the kitchen, where Mrs. Smith

and the maid, Katie, work calmly in the midst of small crises. By contrast, the men threaten the family’s unity. Mr. Smith wants to take the family to New York, thereby destroying its ties with the past. Lon goes away to the East, to college at Princeton. Only Grandpa, as representative of the older generation, sides with the women in their desire to stay in St. Louis. In general, the narrative’s causality makes any departure from the home problematic—an example of how a narrative’s pattern of development can generate an ideological premise.

Within the family, there are minor disagreements, but the members cooperate. The two older sisters, Rose and Esther, help each other in their flirtations. Esther is in love with the boy next door, John Truitt, and marriage to him poses no threat to family unity. Several times in the film, she gazes across at his house without having to leave her own home. First, she and Rose go out onto the porch to try to attract his attention; then she sits in the window to sing “The Boy Next Door” (11.105). Finally, much later, she sits in a darkened bedroom upstairs and sees John pull his shade just after they have become engaged. That the girls might want to travel, or to educate themselves beyond high school, is never considered. By concentrating on the round of small incidents in the household and neighborhood, the film blocks consideration of any alternative way of living—except the dreaded move to New York.

Family Life through Mise-en-Scene and Music Many stylistic devices build up a picture of a happy family life. The Technicolor design contributes greatly to the lushness of the mise-en-scene, making the costumes, the surroundings, and the characters’ hair color stand out richly. In general, color contrasts are used to emphasize the Smith daughters. In 5.7, a shot from the trolley scene, Esther is conspicuous because she is the only woman in black amidst the generally bright-colored dresses. Esther and Rose wear red and green to the Christmas dance (11.106), and this makes the sisters easy to pick out in the swirling crowd of pastel-clad dancers. At the same time, these costumes strengthen the association of the family unity with holidays.

Meet Me in St. Louis is a musical, and music plays a large part in the family’s life. Songs come at moments of romance or gathering. Rose and Esther sing “Meet Me in St. Louis” in the parlor before dinner. When Mr. Smith interrupts them on returning from work—“For heaven’s sake, stop that screeching!”—he’s immediately characterized as opposed to the singing and to the fair. Esther’s other songs show that her romance with John Truitt is a safe and reasonable one. A woman does not have to leave home to find a husband: She can find him in her own neighborhood (“The Boy Next Door”) or by riding the trolley (“The Trolley Song”). Other songs accompany the two parties, and Esther sings “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” to Tootie, the youngest sister, after the Christmas dance. Here she tries to reassure Tootie that life in New York will be all right if the family can remain together.

But already there is a sense that such unity is in danger. Esther sings, “Someday soon we all will be together, if the Fates allow / Until then we’ll have to muddle through somehow.” We know already that Esther has achieved her romantic goal and become engaged to John Truitt. If the Smiths do move to New York, she will have to decide between him and her family. By this point, the plot has reached an impasse; whichever way she decides, the old way of life will be destroyed. The narrative needs a resolution, and Tootie’s hysterical crying in reaction to the song leads Mr. Smith to reconsider his decision.

Tootie’s destruction of the snow people after Esther’s song is a striking image of the threat to family unity posed by the move to New York. As the winter season section opened, the children were building the snow people (and a bear cub) in the yard. In effect, they had created a parallel to their own family (11.107). At first these snow people were part of the comic scene in which Esther and Katie persuade Lon and Rose to go to the Christmas dance together. But when Tootie becomes



11.103



11.104

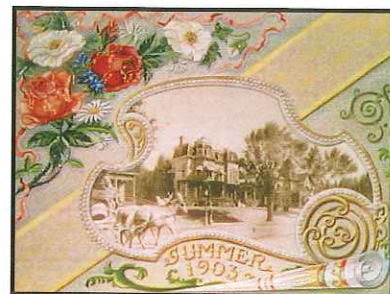
11.103–11.104 The passed-along song. The camera follows the second youngest daughter, Agnes, as she goes upstairs singing “Meet Me in St. Louis” (11.103), and soon Grandpa will pick up the tune. A high-angle shot from over his shoulder shows the second oldest sister Esther stepping out of a buggy after completing the song (11.104).



11.105 The importance of the family house. Esther sings her yearning for “The Boy Next Door.” (Compare 11.104.)



11.106 Brilliant color contrasts. Highly saturated Christmas party gowns fit into the film’s holiday motif.



11.101



11.102

11.101–11.102 Family life and the cycle of seasons. The opening title card, “Summer 1903,” in *Meet Me in St. Louis* (11.101). The candy-box image becomes the Smith household as we enter the world of 1903 St. Louis (11.102).



11.107



11.108

11.107–11.108 The model family. Snow people of various sexes and sizes parallel the family (11.107). Tootie's attack on the snow people (11.108).



11.109 Comfort food as motif. A framing in depth stresses the family as a group, with a plate of cake prominent on the piano in the foreground.

hysterical at the prospect of leaving St. Louis, she runs down in her nightgown to smash the snow people. The scene is almost shocking, since Tootie seems to be killing the doubles of her own family (11.108). In terms of plot motivation, this moment has to be emotional because it must trigger the father's change of mind. He realizes that his desire to move to New York threatens the family's harmony. This realization leads to his decision to stay in St. Louis.

Two other elements of the mise-en-scene create motifs that stress the family's comfortable life. The Smiths live surrounded by food. In the initial scene, the women are making ketchup, which is shortly served at the family dinner. After the scene in which Rose's boyfriend fails to propose to her by phone, the tensions are reconciled, and the maid serves large slices of corned beef.

In the Halloween scene, the connection between plentiful food and family unity becomes even more explicit. At first, the children gather around to eat cake and ice cream, but the father arrives home and makes his announcement about moving to New York. The family members depart without touching their food. Only when they hear the mother and father singing at the piano do they gradually drift back to eat (11.109). The words of the song—"Time may pass, but we'll be together"—accompany them. The use of food as a motif associates the family's life in the house with abundance and with the individual's place as part of a group. At the fair in the last sequence, the family decide to visit a restaurant together. The food motif returns at the moment of their reaffirmation of their life together in St. Louis.

Light and Family Life Another motif of family unity involves light. The house is ablaze much of the time. As the family sits together at dinner, the low evening sun sends bright yellow rays through the white curtains. Later, one of the loveliest scenes involves Esther's request that John accompany her through the downstairs to help her turn out the lights (11.110). As the rooms darken and the couple moves out to the hall, the camera cranes down to a height level with their faces. The shot contains a remarkable shift of tone. It begins with Esther's comically contrived excuse ("I'm afraid of mice") to keep John with her and develops gradually toward a genuinely romantic mood.

The Halloween sequence takes place entirely at night and makes light a central motif. The camera initially moves in toward the house's glowing yellow windows. Tense, slightly eerie music makes the house seem an island of safety in the darkness. As Tootie and Agnes go out to join the other children in playing tricks, they are silhouetted against the flames of the bonfire the group has gathered around. At first the fire seems threatening, contradicting the earlier associations of light with safety and unity, but this scene actually harmonizes with the previous uses of light. Tootie is excluded from the group activities because she is "too little." After she proves herself worthy, she is allowed to help feed the flames along with the others. In the long track-back as Tootie leaves the fire to play her trick, the fire appears as a haven she has left behind (11.111). Indeed, the first sequence of the Halloween section of the film becomes a sort of miniature working out of the entire narrative structure. Tootie's position as a part of the group is abandoned as she moves away from the fire and then triumphantly affirmed as she returns to it.

Similarly, light plays an important part in the resolution of the threat to the family's unity. Late on Christmas Eve, Esther finds Tootie awake. They look out the window at the snow people standing in the yard below. A strip of yellow light falls across the snow, suggesting the warmth and safety of the house they plan to leave (11.108). Tootie's hysterical crying, however, leads Mr. Smith to reconsider his decision. As he sits thinking, he holds the match, with which he was about to light his cigar, unnoticed in his hand until it burns his fingers. Combined with the slow playing of the "Meet Me in St. Louis" theme, the flame serves to emphasize his distraction and his gradual change of mind.

As he calls his family down to announce his decision not to move, he turns up all the lights. The dim, bleak halls full of packing boxes become again the scene of busy activity as the family gathers. The lamps' glass shades are red and green, identifying the house with the appropriate Christmas colors and recalling Esther's and Rose's party dresses. The announcement of the decision leads directly to the opening of the presents, as if to emphasize that staying in St. Louis will not create any financial hardship for the family.

A trip to the fair provides a reassuring epilogue. Earlier Alonzo had dismissed the fair as an annoyance and praised New York as the future. After realizing that family unity outweighed his job opportunity, he's enjoying the event. He affirms his leadership of the family by guiding them to a French restaurant. (No need to go East for exotic cuisine.) The motif of light, earlier associated with safety and comfort, is restated in the shot of the blazing exhibition halls (11.112). The Smiths can remain together and still benefit from progress. The film closes with this dialogue:

MOTHER: There's never been anything like it in the whole world.

ROSE: We don't have to come here in a train or stay in a hotel. It's right in our own hometown.

TOOTIE: Grandpa, they'll never tear it down, will they?

GRANDPA: Well, they'd better not.

ESTHER: I can't believe it. Right here where we live. Right here in St. Louis (11.113).

These lines do not *create* the film's ideology, which has been present in the narrative and stylistic devices throughout. The dialogue puts into words what has been presented through narrative and stylistic patterning all along.

Ideology and Broader Meanings Understanding a film's ideology typically involves analyzing how form and style create meaning. As Chapter 2 suggested, meaning can be of four general types: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic. Our analysis of *Meet Me in St. Louis* has shown how all four types work to reinforce a social ideology—in this case, the values of tradition, home life, and family unity. The referential aspects of the film presuppose that the audience can grasp the difference between St. Louis and New York, and that it knows about international expositions, American family customs, national holidays, and so on. These address the film to a specifically American audience. The explicit meaning of the film is formulated by the final exchange we have just considered, in which the small city is discussed as the perfect fusion of progress and tradition.

We have also traced out one major implicit meaning: the family and home as creating a "haven in a heartless world," the central reference point for the individual's life. What, then, of symptomatic meanings?

Chapter 2 mentioned that systems of values and beliefs may seem unquestionable to the social groups that hold them. One way that groups maintain such systems is to assume that certain things are beyond human choice or control, that they are simply natural. Historically, this habit of thought has often been used to justify oppression and injustice, as when women, minority groups, or the poor are thought to be naturally inferior. *Meet Me in St. Louis* participates in this general tendency, not only in its characterization of the Smith women (Esther and Rose are simply presumed to want husbands) but also in the very choice of a white, upper-middle-class household as an emblem of American life. More subtly, the natural cycle of the seasons is harmonized with the family's life, and the conclusion of the plot takes place in the spring, the time of renewal.

We can also consider more historically specific symptomatic meanings. The film opened in November 1944 (just in time for Christmas). World War II was still raging, although some countries had already been liberated from the



11.110



11.111



11.112

11.110–11.112 Light as motif. As Esther and John turn out the downstairs lights one by one, a long-take crane shot follows the characters from room to room (11.110). At each pause, the chandelier is framed in the upper portion of the screen. During the Halloween sequence, a terrified Tootie moves into the darkness to play her trick (11.111). The motif of light culminates in the revelation of the fairgrounds (11.112).



11.113 Resolution through the couple. The film's final shot, with Esther's dazzled reaction to the fair.

Nazis. The audience for this film would have consisted largely of women and children whose male relatives had been absent for extended periods, often overseas. Families were often forced apart, and the people who remained behind had to make considerable sacrifices for the war effort. In a time when women were required to work in defense plants, factories, and offices (and many were enjoying the experience), there appeared a film that restricted the range of women's experiences to home and family, and yearned for a simpler time when they ruled only the kitchen.

Meet Me in St. Louis can thus be seen as a symptom of a nostalgia for a distant America. In a 1944 audience, parents of young fighting men would remember the 1903–1904 period as part of their own childhoods. All of the formal and stylistic choices—narrative construction, seasonal segmentation, songs, color, and visual motifs—can be seen as reassuring the viewers. If the women and others left at home can be strong and hold their families together, domestic harmony will eventually return. From this perspective, *Meet Me in St. Louis* upholds dominant conceptions of American life and may even propose an ideal of family unity for the postwar future.

Raging Bull

1980. United Artists. Directed by Martin Scorsese. Script by Paul Schrader and Mardik Martin. From the book *Raging Bull* by Jake La Motta, with Joseph Carter and Peter Savage. Photographed by Michael Chapman. Edited by Thelma Schoonmaker. With Robert De Niro, Cathy Moriarty, Joe Pesci, Frank Vincent, Nicholas Colasanto, Theresa Saldana.

In analyzing *Meet Me in St. Louis*, we argued that the film upholds a characteristically American ideology. It's also possible for a film made in Hollywood to take a more ambivalent attitude toward ideological issues. Martin Scorsese's *Raging Bull* does so by making violence its central theme.

Violence is widespread in American cinema, often serving as the basis for entertainment. Extreme violence has become central to many genres, from crime films to science fiction and horror films. Such genres often make their violence very stylized, usually thanks to special effects, and thus not fundamentally disturbing. *Raging Bull* uses a different tactic, drawing on conventions of cinematic realism to make violence visceral. Not only the brutal boxing matches but also the harsh quarrels in everyday life bring brutality to the fore.

Scorsese's film is loosely based on the career of boxer Jake La Motta, who became the world middleweight champion in 1949. *Raging Bull* treats the scenes based on actual prizefights as emblematic of the violence that pervades Jake's life. He seems incapable of dealing with people without picking quarrels, making threats, or exploding in fury. His marriages, especially his second one to Vickie, are full of bickering and domestic abuse. Although his closest relationship is apparently with his brother Joey, who initially manages his career, Jake eventually thrashes Joey in a jealous rage and permanently alienates him. Moreover, while Jake's actions hurt others, he also wreaks havoc on himself. He drives away everyone he loves and ends up as an overweight stand-up comic, then as an actor reciting speeches from famous plays and films.

How are we to understand the ideology of a film that makes such a vicious bully its hero? We might be tempted to posit either/or interpretations. Either the film celebrates Jake's murderous rage, or it condemns him as a pathological case. Yet in settling on one of these simple notions, we would fail to confront the film's uneasy balance of sympathy for and revulsion toward its central character. We suggest that *Raging Bull* uses a variety of strategies, both of narrative and style, to make Jake a case study in the role of violence in American life. By balancing repulsion with a degree of compassion, Scorsese thus creates a complex context within which Jake's actions must be judged.

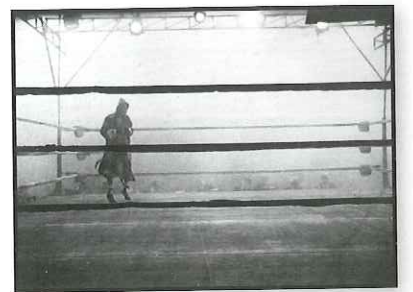
Narrative Progression As usual, it helps to start an analysis by mapping the film's formal structure. If we were to segment *Raging Bull*, we would come up with about 46 distinct scenes, including the opening credits and the closing quotation title. To make things manageable, we group them into 12 major parts:

1. The opening credits, shown over a lengthy shot of Jake warming up alone in a boxing ring.
2. Backstage in a nightclub, 1964. Jake practices a poem he will recite.
Flashback begins:
3. 1941. Expository scenes of Jake losing a match, fighting with his wife, seeing Vickie, and having his first date with her.
4. 1943. Two matches with Sugar Ray Robinson, separated by a love scene between Jake and Vickie.
5. A montage sequence alternating a series of fights, 1944 to 1947, and home movies of Jake's private life.
6. A lengthy series of scenes in 1947, including three in the Copacabana nightclub, establishing Jake's jealousy over Vickie and hatred of the mob. He ends by throwing a fight for them.
7. 1949. An argument with Vickie, followed by Jake's winning the middleweight champion bout.
8. 1950. Jake beats up Vickie and his brother Joey in an unjustified jealous rage. He defends his title and fights Robinson again.
9. 1956. Jake retires and buys a nightclub in which he does comedy routines. Vickie leaves him, and he is arrested on a morals charge.
10. 1958. Jake does his comedy act in a cheap strip joint; he fails to persuade Joey to reconcile with him.
Flashback ends.
11. 1964. Jake prepares to go onstage to perform his recital.
12. A black title with a biblical quotation and the film's dedication.

The beginning and ending of the film are vital in shaping our attitude toward Jake's career. The first image shows him warming up in the ring before an unspecified fight (11.114). Several filmic devices create our initial impressions of the protagonist. He bounces up and down in place, in slow motion. This slow tempo is accompanied by languid classical music, suggesting that his boxing warm-up is like a dance. The deep-space staging places the ring's ropes prominently in the foreground and makes the ring seem huge, emphasizing Jake's solitude. This long take continues through the main credits, establishing boxing as both a beautiful and a lonely sport. The image remains abstract and remote: it is the only scene in the narrative that does not take place in a year specified by a superimposed title.

A straight cut to segment 2 shows Jake, suddenly fat and old. He's practicing, but now it's rehearsal for a one-man show of readings and recitations. He tries out a poem he has written about himself: "So give me a stage / Where this bull here can rage / And though I can fight / I'd much rather recite—That's entertainment!" The opening image has given him a bare stage, but the comedown from his glory days is apparent. This backstage episode takes place quite late in the story chronology, after the long struggles of his boxing career. Not until segment 11 will the plot return to this moment, with Jake continuing to rehearse his lines. In segment 11, as the manager summons him onstage, he executes some warm-up punches to build his confidence, muttering rapidly over and over, "I'm the boss, I'm the boss."

By framing most of the story action as a flashback, Scorsese links violence with entertainment, in the ring or in a nightclub. Jake's gesture of spreading his



11.114 The isolated fighter. The slow-motion opening shot of *Raging Bull*. Unspecified in time and place, it presents a lyrical, idealized image of prizefighting very different from the bouts we'll see.



11.115



11.116

11.115–11.116 Contrast for realistic impact. A graphic match cuts straight from a medium close-up of Jake at the end of segment 2, in 1964 (11.115), to a similar framing of him in the ring in 1941 (11.116).



11.117 Visceral impact. Realistic violence in the boxing scenes.

arms as he says, “That’s entertainment!” in segment 2 resembles the triumphant raising of his glove-clad hands whenever he wins a fight in the lengthy central flashback. Correspondingly, *Raging Bull* ignores Jake’s early life and concentrates on two periods: his boxing career and his turn to stand-up comedy and literary performances. Both periods present him as trying to control his life and the people around him. “I’m the boss,” the last line spoken in the film, sums up Jake’s attitude in every phase.

The plot structure we’ve outlined also traces a rise-and-fall pattern of development. After segment 7, Jake’s high point, his life runs downhill, and his violence appears more and more savagely self-destructive. In addition, certain motifs highlight the role of violence in his life and the lives of those around him. During a rest period in his first bout (segment 3), a fistfight breaks out in the stands, suggesting from the start that violence spills beyond the ring. Domestic relations are expressed through aggression, as in the tough-guy shoving between Jake and Joey and in Joey’s disciplining his son by threatening to stab him.

Most vividly, violence is turned against women. Both Jake and Joey insult and threaten their wives, and Jake’s beating of both his wives forms a grim counterpoint to his battles in the ring. During the first scene at the Copacabana, women emerge as targets of abuse. Jake accuses Vickie of flirting with other men; he insults a boxer and a mob member by suggesting that both are like women; and even the comedian onstage mocks women in the audience. Scene by scene, the organization of incidents and motifs suggests that male aggression pervades American life.

Violence: Realism and Stylization The film’s presentation of violence draws on particular conventions of realism. A series of superimposed titles identify each boxing match by date, locale, and participants. This narrational tactic yields a quasi-documentary quality. The most important factor creating realism, however, is probably the acting. Aside from Robert De Niro, the cast was chosen from virtually unknown actors or nonactors. As a result, they did not bring glamorous star associations to the film. De Niro was known mainly for his grittily realistic performances in Scorsese’s *Mean Streets* and *Taxi Driver*, as well as Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter*. In *Raging Bull*, the actors speak with thick Bronx accents, repeat or mumble many of their lines, and make no attempt to create likable characters. In the publicity surrounding the film, much was also made of the fact that De Niro gained 60 pounds in order to play Jake as an older man. The film emphasizes De Niro’s transformation at various points (11.115, 11.116). Such realism in the acting and other techniques makes it difficult for us to accept the film’s violence casually, as we might in a conventional horror or crime film.

Film techniques also make violence disturbing. Outside the ring, domestic violence is presented harshly, but usually in long shots and without extravagant sound effects. More aggressive stylistically are the prizefight scenes, which arouse visceral shock in the viewer. Many of the fights are filmed with the camera on a Steadicam brace, which yields ominous tracking movements or close shots of grimaces. Backlighting, motivated by the spotlights around the ring, highlight droplets of sweat or blood that spray off the boxers (11.117). Punches are intensified with loud, stinging cracks on the sound track and rapid editing, often with abrupt ellipses from shot to shot. Special makeup shows facial blood vessels spurting grotesquely.

Through its narrative structure and its use of the stylistic conventions of realism, the film offers a criticism of violence in American life, both in the ring and in the home. Yet the film doesn’t permit us to condemn Jake as merely a raging bull. It also presents violence as fascinating and ambiguous. Although the fight scenes favor brutal realism, aspects of them are distorted in mesmerizing ways. The sounds of punches assault our ears with shuddering impact. The sound mix for the fights blended animal cries, airplane motors, whizzing arrows, and even music, but the sources are unrecognizable because they are slowed down or played backward. For

all their bloodiness, the fight scenes have their own beauty, partly thanks to slow-motion shooting and stylized lighting.

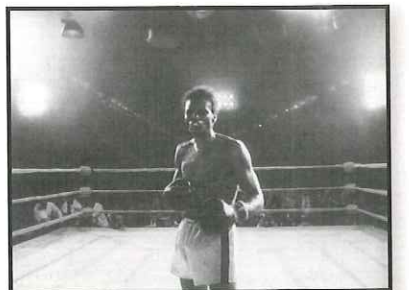
Narrational Restriction and Masculine Aggression Violence is made disturbingly attractive even in the scenes outside the ring. This is partly because the narration concentrates far more on the perpetrators of the violence than on the victims. In particular, the three important female characters—Jake’s first wife, Joey’s wife Lenore, and Vickie—have little to do in the action except take abuse or rail ineffectually against it. We never learn why they are initially attracted to the violent men they marry or why they stay with them so long. At first Vickie seems to admire Jake for his fame and his flashy car, but her willingness to sustain their marriage for so long is not explained. Indeed, her sudden decision to leave him after 11 years has no specific motivation.

The victims of Jake’s violence serve chiefly to provoke him to respond. One portion of the action focuses on his pummeling of a “pretty” fighter to whom he thinks Vickie is attracted. Another deals with Jake’s violent reaction to his irrational belief that Joey and Vickie have had an affair. It is notable that after this crisis, when Jake beats Joey up, Joey becomes as peripheral a figure as Vickie. We glimpse him briefly watching Jake’s bloody title defeat and then see a short scene of him resisting Jake’s offer of reconciliation. The film thus offers no positive counterweight to Jake’s excesses.

The film’s restriction to a male perspective is even more apparent when the narration shifts into subjective presentation. Several scenes show events from Jake’s point of view, using slow motion to suggest that we are seeing not just what he sees but how he responds to it. This technique becomes especially vivid when Jake notices Vickie with other men and becomes jealous. Similarly, in the final fight with Robinson, Jake’s vision of his opponent is shown via a markedly subjective point-of-view framing. The POV imagery also incorporates a combined track-forward and zoom-out to make the ring seem to stretch far into the distance, while a decrease in the frontal light makes Robinson appear even more menacing (11.118). Other deviations from realism, such as the thunderous throbbing on the sound track during Jake’s major victory bout, also suggest that we’re entering Jake’s mind.

Moments of perceptual and mental subjectivity don’t necessarily make us forgive Jake’s brutality, but they do make us understand him better. Along similar lines, Scorsese includes scenes that suggest that Jake can at moments tame his aggressiveness. However much he hurts other people, he injures himself too. He sometimes regrets having hurt people, as several parallel scenes show. In segment 3, Jake has a vicious argument with his first wife in which he threatens to kill her but then immediately says, “Come on, honey, let’s be—let’s be friends. Truce, all right?” Later, after he has beaten Vickie up for her imagined infidelities, he apologizes and persuades her to stay with him. These domestic reconciliations are echoed in the big title fight where he defeats the current champion, Marcel Cerdan, then walks to his opponent’s corner and magnanimously embraces him.

A degree of compassion for Jake is reinforced by other means. *Raging Bull* suggests that he is strongly masochistic, inducing others to inflict pain on him. This notion is emphasized in the love scene in segment 4, when he childishly asks Vickie to caress and kiss the wounds from his triumph over Sugar Ray Robinson (11.119). Soon Jake denies himself sexual gratification by pouring ice water into his shorts. The scene then leads directly into a fight in which Robinson defeats Jake. This defeat is paralleled in segment 8, another boxing scene, when Jake simply stands and goads Robinson into beating him to a pulp. The motif of masochism comes to a climax in segment 9, when Jake is thrown into solitary confinement in a Dade County jail. A long, disturbing take has Jake beating his head and fists against the prison wall, as he asserts that he is not an animal and berates himself as stupid.



11.118



11.119

11.118–11.119 Violence as entertainment and as psychological drive. Jake’s point of view during a fight (11.118). At home, a close-up links violence and sexuality as Jake asks Vickie to kiss his bruises (11.119).

More implicitly, the film suggests that some of Jake's aggressiveness can be traced to repressed homosexuality. His embrace of the defeated opponent, Cerdan, in his title fight, as well as his urging of Robinson to attack him in his final bout, suggest such an interpretation. In segment 6, when Jake sits down at a nightclub table and jokes about how pretty his upcoming opponent is, he tauntingly offers him as a sex partner to a mobster he suspects of being in love with Vickie. In segment 8, one scene begins with an erotically suggestive slow-motion shot of seconds' hands massaging Jake's torso. There are hints that Jake's fascination with boxing and his refusal to deal with his domestic life stem from an unacknowledged homosexual urge. Such an implication goes against the usual ideology of Hollywood, which assumes that a heterosexual romance is the basis for most narratives.

Ultimately, the ideological stance that *Raging Bull* offers is far from being as straightforward as that of *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Instead of displaying an idealized image of American society, the film criticizes one pervasive aspect of that society: its penchant for violence, as public entertainment and private conduct. Yet it also displays a considerable fascination with that violence, acknowledging its visceral force and considerable beauty. Similarly, Jake is admirable as a dedicated gladiator, but he's also a brute. The film doesn't make us like Jake or even sympathize with him, but it does suggest ways of understanding him—with even a degree of compassion. A man who does not know why he does what he does, who slams his head against the wall shouting that he's not an animal, is perhaps more to be pitied than despised.

Closing on an Uncertain Note The film's ambiguity intensifies at the end. In segment 12, a biblical quotation appears: "So, for the second time, [the Pharisees] summoned the man who had been blind and said: 'Speak the truth before God. We know this fellow is a sinner.' 'Whether or not he is a sinner, I do not know,' the man replied. 'All I know is this: once I was blind and now I can see.'"

As this quotation emerges line by line, we are cued to relate it to the protagonist. Has Jake achieved some sort of enlightenment through his experiences? Several factors suggest not. Despite being a poor actor, he continues to perform literary recitals, trying to regain his public ("I'm the boss"). Furthermore, the speech he practices at the end is the famous "I could have been a contender" passage from *On the Waterfront*. In that film, a failed boxer blamed his brother for his lack of a chance to succeed. Is Jake now blaming Joey or someone else for his decline? Or is it possible that he has become aware enough of his faults to ironically recall a film in which the hero admits his mistakes?

After the biblical quotation, there appears Scorsese's dedication of the film: "Remembering Haig R. Manoogian, teacher, May 23, 1916–May 26, 1980, with love and resolution, Marty." Now the biblical quotation may apply to Scorsese, also from the tough Italian neighborhoods of New York. Were it not for people like this teacher, he might have ended up somewhat like Jake. And perhaps the film professor, who helped him "to see," enabled Scorsese to present Jake with a mixture of detachment and sympathy. Like the two taglines at the close of *Do The Right Thing*, these final inscriptions invite us to weigh alternative interpretations of the action we've seen.

As a cinema student, Scorsese was well aware of innovative foreign films such as *Breathless* and *Tokyo Story*, so it's not surprising that his own work invites a range of interpretations. The film's ending places *Raging Bull* in a tradition of Hollywood films, such as *Citizen Kane*, that keep us at some distance from their protagonist so that we can judge him objectively. Like *Kane*, Scorsese's film avoids complete closure and opts for a degree of ambiguity, a denial of either/or answers. This ambiguity can render the film's ideology equivocal, generating contrasting and even conflicting implicit meanings.

"I was fascinated by the self-destructive side of Jake La Motta's character, by his very basic emotions. What could be more basic than making a living by hitting another person on the head until one of you falls or stops? . . . I put everything I knew and felt into that film, and I thought it would be the end of my career. It was what I call a kamikaze way of making movies: pour everything in, then forget about it and go find another way of life."

—Martin Scorsese, director

PART

6

Investigating film history can take you in many different directions. You might study the business, asking how a studio worked or how exhibitors promoted a particular film. You could study major individuals—a star, a director, a mogul, a cinematographer, a composer. You could research movie audiences and the ways in which social and cultural forces have shaped tastes at different times. In keeping with the focus of this book, this final chapter offers another perspective. Here we ask you to think about how film form and style have changed across history.

General interest in the history of film art has probably never been higher. Classics are rereleased on video. The anniversaries of *Casablanca* and *The Godfather* bring forth theatrical showings. Newly restored silent films such as *Metropolis* and *Napoléon* are screened accompanied by orchestras. The success of *Hugo* and *The Artist* suggests that a great many people enjoy getting glimpses into film history.

Studying how the art of film has changed across time is fascinating. It's intrinsically interesting to learn that our ways of making movies aren't the only ways. An Eisenstein or a Renoir had rather different conceptions of filmic storytelling than most directors have today. Just as important, by examining the development of the medium, we realize that this week's blockbuster or buzzed-about indie hit is already part of history. Every new film carries within it conventions and choices that reach far back into the past. If we're tuned to the right frequency, we can feel film history pulsing through every movie made now. We can better appreciate the accomplishments of our filmmakers if we realize that they're working creatively with, and sometimes against, traditions that are part of a long legacy.

Film Art and Film History

CHAPTER

12

Historical Changes in Film Art: Conventions and Choices, Tradition and Trends

Throughout this book, we've urged you to think like a filmmaker. We believe that it's a good way to enhance your appreciation of how films work. We've tried to aid that appreciation by setting out the range of options filmmakers face when they shape their film's overall form (Chapters 1–3), when they employ techniques of the medium (Chapters 4–8), and when they position the film within genres or other categories (Chapters 9–10). The book has surveyed a very big menu of artistic choices.

As we've also suggested, filmmakers are obliged to make creative decisions at every stage of the process. But actually all the options we've scanned aren't available to any one filmmaker at any particular period. In different times and places, filmmakers have had narrower menus of options.

We can understand the art of film better if we're aware of those options, of the constraints and opportunities available to earlier film creators. Just as important, when we understand the choices the filmmakers could make, we can have richer experiences of the films. For instance, it wouldn't be reasonable to say that because Buster Keaton couldn't make *Our Hospitality* with sound we couldn't enjoy the movie. Once we notice how Keaton uses deep space, theme-and-variations gags, and other resources of visual storytelling, the film offers us a delightful experience (pp. 154–158). Similarly, some people won't watch black-and-white films, but if we understand that most filmmakers before the 1960s could not afford the costs of color filming, we're in a good position to notice how this constraint could be exploited to make lighting, set design, and costumes vivid in black and white.

In this chapter we consider some options and opportunities available to filmmakers at certain points in history. Sometimes the options seem limited, but surprisingly, they can also nourish creative moviemaking. If you willingly cut down your choices, you can concentrate on working *within* them. For example, if you've embraced intensified continuity (pp. 246–250) as your editing paradigm, you will still face all manner of choices, but they're more focused and specific.

At the same time, limits can be challenges, provoking filmmakers to seek alternatives. Again and again we'll see that filmmakers who found the classical Hollywood model too confining have sought other, equally effective ways to make

movies. But even when filmmakers refuse tradition, that tradition has shaped their creative thinking. And often rebellion against one tradition will draw upon other traditions. We'll see, for instance, that young Soviet filmmakers, refusing the meticulously staged melodramas of the older generation, drew inspiration from the emerging tradition of Hollywood. Studying film history reminds us that, one way or another, filmmakers are always indebted to other filmmakers—their contemporaries, or those who have come before.

CREATIVE DECISIONS

Film Form and Style across History

Why do older movies feel different from those we see today? It's not that their makers were less smart or sophisticated than we are. We can appreciate films from earlier times better if we think in terms we've discussed throughout this book.

Perhaps the biggest obstacle to understanding older films is the fact that they operate according to different *conventions*. Across most of film history, for instance, censorship blocked filmmakers from directly presenting intimate sexual situations. That forced screenwriters and directors to hint that two people were erotically attracted or were having an affair. By contrast, many of today's movies present nudity, intercourse, and other sexual displays. That convention of our time doesn't make our films better, just different—although some historians will argue when filmmakers were forced to be indirect, their films became more slyly unpredictable than ours are (12.1).

Because audiences of earlier times knew the conventions, they came in with different *expectations* than we do today. For instance, an audience for silent films expected the acting to be visually expressive. That doesn't mean that silent-film acting was broad or overdone; in fact, we find plenty of subtle performances in the period. (See p. 134.) It's just that viewers of the 1910s and 1920s expected actors to use their whole bodies to communicate emotion pictorially. Our actors are more likely to rely on their facial expressions and line readings.

Most basically, filmmakers of earlier eras had different formal and stylistic options to choose from. Since we're used to thinking that we enjoy a wider range of creative choices than they did, their films might seem limited.

There were certainly technological constraints. Before 1930 or so, most directors couldn't make a film with sound, and before 1960 or thereabouts, most producers couldn't afford to make a film in color. Zoom lenses weren't practical until the 1950s, and digital effects had to wait for faster chips, bigger storage space, and more sophisticated programs.

Less obviously, some storytelling options just weren't thinkable at certain points. Today we routinely see complicated flashback plots in such ordinary movies as *The Hangover*, but we seldom see them in films of the silent era. The discontinuity editing Eisenstein exploited in *October* (1927) wasn't on the menu five years earlier. Nobody thought of it. Likewise, filmmakers could have employed slow motion in fiction features in the 1930s and 1940s, but it was almost unknown. Today it's common.

Do all these factors mean that formal and stylistic options have expanded? Does today's filmmaker have a greater range of choice than in earlier times? To some extent, yes; innovations have accumulated, providing the filmmaker a big toolkit. But some older options aren't live ones for every filmmaker.



12.1 Images say what dialogue can't. Shadows prophesy the outcome of a flirtation in Ernst Lubitsch's *Trouble in Paradise* (1932).



12.2



12.3

12.2–12.3 Widescreen staging. The anamorphic 2.55 ratio widescreen of early CinemaScope (p. 182) encouraged filmmakers to use broad, distant staging in long takes, as in *The Robe* (1953; 12.2). Director Henry Koster uses several characters' eyelines to call attention to Marcellus, the figure on the near left. This stylistic choice is rare in contemporary Hollywood. Yet some recent filmmakers in other countries have found distant staging a fruitful technique. In *Dust in the Wind* (1986; 12.3) Hou Hsiao-hsien also uses characters' eyelines to direct our attention to the significant action, the father on his deathbed. In addition, Hou's set blocks off the right portion of the frame and minimizes other characters through shadow and aspects of setting. A chair conceals the face of the kneeling daughter, so that her face won't distract us from the father.

For example, directors working with the CinemaScope widescreen process in the early 1950s felt obliged to stage the action fairly far from the camera and to spread the action out across the frame (12.2). Fairly soon, improvements in lenses and other equipment enabled them to use more medium shots and close-ups. By the mid-1960s, broad and distant staging became rare, and today a Hollywood filmmaker who decided to revisit that approach would risk looking old-fashioned. The contemporary approach is to frame actors tightly, even in widescreen formats (1.52, 6.119–6.134). Yet this distant, lateral staging was by no means a dead end creatively. Directors in other countries have refined techniques that are similar to what we see in early 'Scope films (12.3).

Or go back to the example of a telephone conversation (p. 263). Suppose you want to show both Jim and Amanda as they talk. Today most directors would simply cut from one to the other. In the 1910s, however, there was another option: a split screen (12.4). It was striking but a bit complicated to shoot, so it was eventually dropped in favor of cutting. But during the 1960s it was occasionally revived for



12.4



12.5



12.6

12.4–12.6 Techniques revived. Split-screen presentation of phone conversations was not unusual in the period of *Suspense* (1913; 12.4). For decades afterward it was almost never used, but it was revived in the 1960s occasionally for suspense or comedy, as in the musical *Bye Bye Birdie* (1963; 12.5). It was also a handy way to fill up the wide screen. The 2003 retro comedy *Down with Love* refers back to the 1960s convention (12.6).

comedies (12.5). Today a director might call on it for comic effect, or to hark back to its 1960s usage (12.6).

The art historian Heinrich Wölfflin summed up this situation in a famous line: "Not everything is possible at all times." At any moment in film history, there are forces—technology, budget, political censorship, prevailing tastes, clashes within the production team—working to limit artistic choices. The limits on today's filmmakers aren't as visible to us, but they are there. In watching an older film, we should try to understand the options that filmmakers had to work with at the time. That will sensitize us not only to the range of possibilities but also to the ways in which some filmmakers, in a quest to try something different, came up with innovations that later creators could use.

Traditions and Movements in Film History

We've presented artistic decision making in film as a matter of individual choice. That's accurate, up to a point. But most filmmakers work in groups, as we saw back in Chapter 1. Members of the group contribute to decisions about the project. Moreover, the team members have learned their craft from other filmmakers. The community that shapes a filmmaker's choice includes many who have gone before, who have laid down best practices and solid solutions to recurring problems.

In other words, filmmakers belong to *traditions*. They pass ideas about movie-making from peer to peer, from expert to novice. And many of those ideas are suggestions about what choices you should make. Screenwriters learn to write using three-act structure; cinematographers learn favored ways of lighting faces;



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Some modern filmmakers have tried to imitate older films' look and feel. Does it work? On *The Good German*, see "Not back to the future, but ahead to the past." On *Casino Royale*, see "Can they make 'em like they used to? Continued."



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"What's left to discover today? Plenty" considers the ways that our knowledge of filmmaking traditions changes as forgotten films come to light.

actors learn what counts as a good performance. A tradition, in effect, favors certain creative choices over others.

One of the best examples of a filmmaking tradition is American studio cinema, so at various points in the chapter we'll examine how that tradition emerged and changed. In many respects, the Hollywood tradition influenced filmmaking around the world. A more limited tradition is that of Hong Kong action cinema of the 1980s and 1990s. That too, as we'll see, proved quite influential.

Traditions nudge a filmmaker toward certain choices and away from others. But sometimes filmmakers want to explore those others. In instances like these, we get the shorter-lived trends we call *movements*. In a movement, filmmakers typically operate within a common production structure and share certain assumptions about filmmaking. Above all, they favor a common approach to form, style, and theme that sets them somewhat apart from the usual practices. They innovate. Movements, then, are *untraditional* in some ways. They press filmmakers to make unusual formal and stylistic choices.

Sometimes the filmmakers in a movement know one another well and respond to one another's projects. This situation occurred with the Soviet Montage filmmakers of the 1920s, the Surrealists of the period, and the French New Wave of the 1950s–1960s. Here we find young people cooperating and competing because they wanted to explore some new ideas about what cinema could be. To clarify those ideas, they often wrote books and articles. Other movements are more diffuse, with unconnected filmmakers gravitating toward a common approach to form and style.

Most movements don't last more than a few years, but they can exercise a far-reaching effect. Some movements of the silent and early sound era have affected filmmaking for decades afterward. As we'll see, many movements have been selectively absorbed into broader traditions, particularly Hollywood's. The films of our time reenact creative decisions made by filmmakers in the past.

You should already have a sense of this process, because our examples from both recent films and older ones show that today's films often accept or rework choices that were made in much earlier work. In several sections that follow, we mention how some contemporary filmmakers have found inspiration in the choices favored by film movements.

Because we're exploring historical contexts, we'll go beyond noting stylistic and formal qualities. For each tradition and movement, we'll point to relevant factors that affect the filmmakers' options—factors such as the state of the industry, artistic theories held by the filmmakers themselves, technological features, and cultural and economic forces. These factors help explain how a particular trend began and developed. This material will also provide a context for particular films we've already discussed. For example, we introduced you to Georges Méliès in Chapter 4 and Louis Lumière in Chapter 5. In the previous chapter, we analyzed a Soviet Montage film (*Man with a Movie Camera*) and a French New Wave one (*Breathless*). Now you have a chance to see this work in a broader context.

In the sections that follow, we haven't tried to characterize other important traditions, such as that of Japanese cinema, or other movements, such as Brazil's Cinema Novo of the early 1960s. Readers interested in knowing more can consult our *Film History: An Introduction*. Here we simply trace how certain possibilities of film form and style were explored in a few typical and well-known historical traditions and movements. The first section sets the stage for them by examining the origins of cinema itself.

Early Cinema (1893–1903)

In Chapter 1, we saw that film is a technology-driven medium. To create the illusion of movement, still pictures must appear in rapid succession. To prepare those images and display them at the right rate, certain technologies are necessary.

Photography and Cinema

Most basically, there must be a way of recording a long series of images on some sort of support. In principle, one could simply draw a string of images on a strip of paper or a disc. But photography offered the cheapest and most efficient way to generate the thousands of images needed for a reasonably lengthy show. Thus the invention of photography in 1826 launched a series of discoveries that made cinema possible.

Early photographs required lengthy exposures (initially hours, later minutes) for a single image; this made photographed motion pictures, which need 12 or more frames per second, impossible. Faster exposures, of about 1/25th of a second, became possible by the 1870s, but only on glass plates. Glass plates weren't usable for motion pictures since there was no practical way to move them through a camera or projector. In 1878, Eadweard Muybridge, an American photographer, did make a series of photographs of a running horse by using a series of cameras with glass plate film and fast exposure, but he was primarily interested in freezing phases of an action, not re-creating the movement by projecting the images in succession.

In 1882, another scientist interested in analyzing animal movement, the Frenchman Étienne-Jules Marey, invented a camera that recorded 12 separate images on the edge of a revolving disc of film on glass. This constituted a step toward the motion picture camera. In 1888, Marey built the first camera to use a strip of flexible film, this time on paper. Again, the purpose was only to break down movement into a series of stills, and the movements photographed lasted a second or less. In 1889, George Eastman introduced a crude flexible film base, celluloid. After this base was improved and camera mechanisms had been devised to draw the film past the lens and expose it to light, the creation of long strips of frames became possible.

Projectors had existed for many years and had been used to show slides and shadow entertainments. These magic lanterns were modified by the addition of shutters, cranks, and other devices to become early motion picture projectors.

One final device was needed if films were to be projected. Since the film stops briefly while the light shines through each individual frame, there had to be a mechanism to create an *intermittent* motion of the film. Marey used a Maltese cross gear on his 1888 camera, and this became a standard part of early cameras and projectors.

A flexible and transparent film base, a fast exposure time, a mechanism to pull the film through the camera, an intermittent device to stop the film, and a shutter to block off light—all these innovations had been achieved by the early 1890s. After several years, inventors working independently in many countries had developed film cameras and projection devices. The two most important firms were the Edison Manufacturing Company in America, owned by inventor Thomas A. Edison, and Lumière Frères in France, the family firm of Louis and Auguste Lumière.

Edison vs. Lumière

By 1893, Thomas A. Edison's assistant, W. K. L. Dickson, had developed a camera that made short 35mm films. Interested in exploiting these films as a novelty, Edison hoped to combine them with his phonograph to show sound movies. He had Dickson develop a peep-show machine, the *Kinetoscope* (12.7), to display these films to individual viewers.

But Edison believed that movies were a passing fad, so he didn't develop a system to project films onto a screen. This task was left to the Lumière brothers. They invented their own camera independently; it exposed a short roll of 35mm film and also served as a projector (12.8). On December 28, 1895, the Lumière brothers presented motion pictures on a screen, at the Grand Café in Paris.

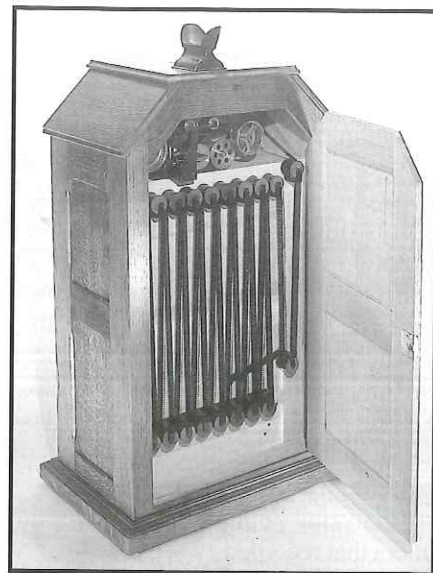
There had been several earlier public screenings, but the Lumières found the most practical method for projecting films, and their format largely determined the direction in which the new medium developed. Edison was obliged to follow their example, abandoning the Kinetoscope and creating his own production company to make films for public projection.



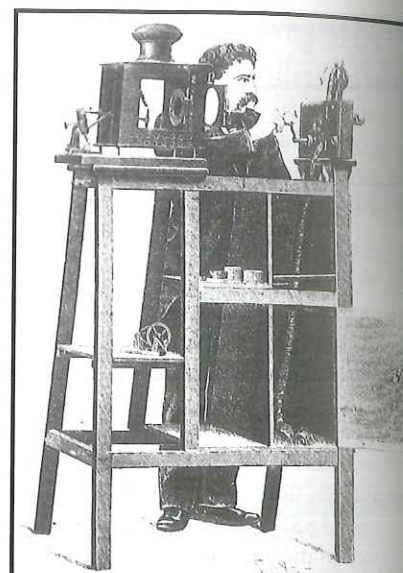
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Early cinema was influenced by other media of its day, including narrative painting. We suggest some similarities in "Professor sees more parallels between things, other things."

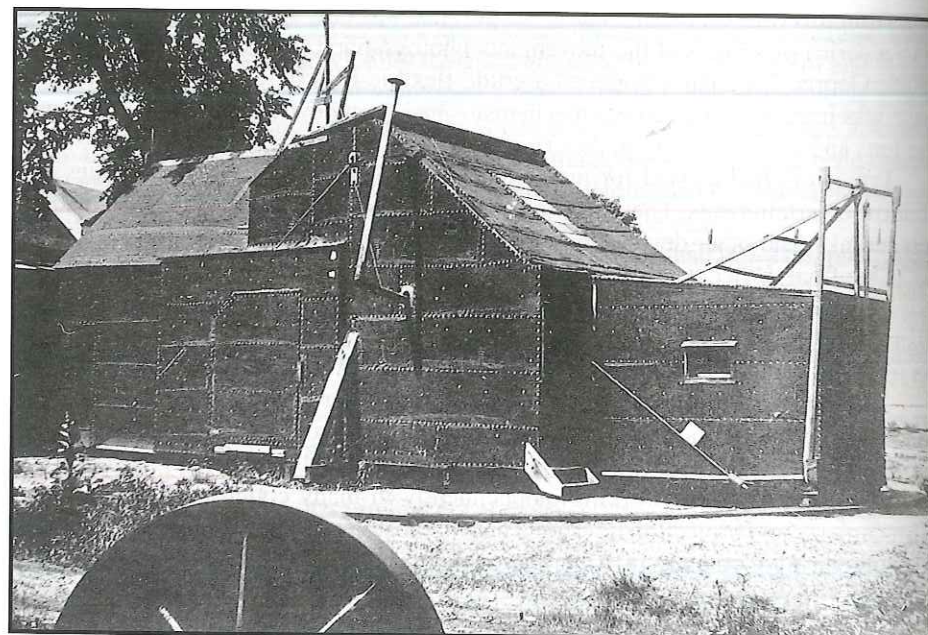
12.7–12.9 Alternative approaches to early filmmaking. Edison's Kinetoscope threaded film in a continuous loop around a series of bobbins (12.7). The film was watched by one viewer at a time. The Lumière brothers aimed for public screenings, so they put a magic-lantern projector behind their camera so the images could be displayed to several viewers (12.8). In Edison's rotating film studio, the Black Maria, a hinged central portion of the roof swung open for filming (12.9).



12.7



12.8



12.9

“In conjuring you work under the attentive gaze of the public, who never fail to spot a suspicious movement. You are alone, their eyes never leave you. Failure would not be tolerated. . . . While in the cinema . . . you can do your confecting quietly, far from those profane gazes, and you can do things thirty-six times if necessary until they are right. This allows you to travel further in the domain of the marvellous.”

—George Méliès, magician and filmmaker

Early Form and Style

The first films typically consisted of a single shot framing an action, usually at long-shot distance. In the first film studio, Edison's Black Maria (12.9), vaudeville entertainers, famous sports figures, and celebrities such as Annie Oakley performed for the camera. A hinged portion of the roof opened to admit a patch of sunlight, and the entire building turned on a circular rail (visible in 12.9) to follow the sun's motion. The Lumières, however, took their cameras out to parks, gardens, beaches, and other public places to film everyday activities or news events, as in their *Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat Station* (5.64).

Until about 1903, most films showed scenic places or noteworthy events, so these can be considered early documentaries. The Lumières sent camera operators all over the world to photograph important events and exotic locales.

Staged narratives, brief skits or gags, were also popular. Edison's staff played out comic scenes, such as one copyrighted 1893 in which a drunken man struggles briefly with a policeman. The Lumières made a popular short, *L'Arroseur arrosé* (*The Waterer Watered*, 1895), also a comic scene, in which a boy tricks a gardener into squirting himself with a hose (4.8).

The earliest films may look crude to us today. This is partly because we seldom see good copies. In properly preserved prints, shown at the right projection speed, the films have a photographic richness that has seldom been equaled. But because they were so short—before 1905, running only a few minutes—the first films couldn't develop complex stories or rhetorical arguments. Relying on unusual events, cute animals, and other brief attractions, they look forward to the amateur videos that show up on YouTube today (12.10). Early films have inspired avant-garde filmmakers to explore movement and abstract photographic qualities (12.11).

Méliès, Magic, and Fictional Narrative

In 1896, Georges Méliès built his own camera, based on a projector he had bought. His first films resembled the Lumières' shots of everyday activities. But as we have seen (pp. 113–114), Méliès was a stage magician, and he discovered the possibilities of special effects. In 1897, Méliès built his own studio, filled with flats and trapdoors. These allowed him to control his effects very precisely (12.12).

Méliès built elaborate settings to create fantasy worlds within which his magical transformations could occur. As we've already seen, this care in manipulating setting, lighting, costume, and staging made Méliès the first master of mise-en-scene (4.3–4.6). He was also an important innovator in editing. For one thing, he found that he could create magical transformations by stopping the camera, adjusting elements in the scene, and then resuming filming. Inspecting the original material, historians have found that Méliès trimmed a few frames at each special effect. Stopping and restarting the camera created light bursts on the first few frames, and these had to be snipped out.

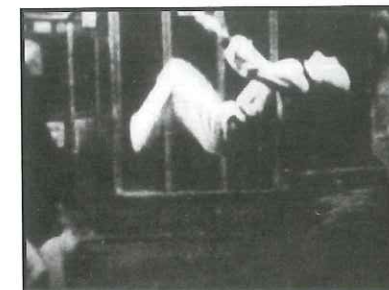
Méliès progressed to longer narratives, with each scene played out in a single camera position, and he used cuts to link them. The most famous of these was *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). Méliès's Star Film company was associated with magic tricks and fairy stories, but it turned out an astonishing variety of films, including scenes from the Bible and a series based on the Dreyfus case. The dazzling special effects, the impressive settings and costumes, and the expansive fantasies and historical narratives made Méliès's films popular and widely imitated. They still exercise a powerful hold, having been painstakingly collected and restored, released on DVD, and given a central role in Martin Scorsese's *Hugo* (2011), which pays homage to Méliès by restaging some of the films.

The work of Lumière, Méliès, and other early filmmakers gained worldwide fame because films circulated freely from country to country. The French phonograph company Pathé Frères moved into filmmaking in 1901, establishing production and distribution branches in many countries. Until 1914, Pathé was the largest film concern in the world. In England, several entrepreneurs managed to invent or obtain equipment and made scenics, narratives, and trick films from 1895 into the early years of the 20th century. Members of the Brighton School (primarily G. Albert Smith and James Williamson), as well as others such as Cecil Hepworth, shot their films on location or in simple open-air studios (as in 12.13). Their innovative films circulated abroad and influenced other filmmakers. Pioneers in other countries invented or bought equipment and were soon making their own films of everyday scenes or fantasy transformations.

As films became longer, narrative form became the most prominent type of filmmaking in the commercial industry, and the popularity of cinema continued to grow. French, Italian, and American films ruled world markets. Later, World War I was to restrict the international flow of films, and Hollywood emerged as



12.10



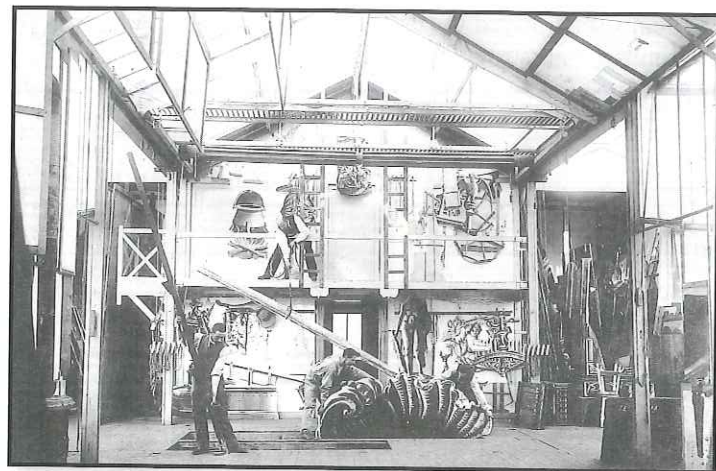
12.11

12.10–12.11 Early film and later interests. A Lumière film from 1900, *La petite fille et son chat* (*The Little Girl and Her Cat*), centers on a perennial attraction of today's online videos (12.10). In *Tom, the Piper's Son* (1969), avant-garde filmmaker Ken Jacobs uses an optical printer to dissect and stylize a 1905 film of the same name, creating what Jacobs calls “a dream within a dream” (12.11).



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In the first years, filmmaking sprang up in small towns all across America. The films are still being rediscovered, as we found in “You can go home again, and maybe find an old movie.”



12.12

12.12–12.13 Early studio shooting. Unlike Edison's Black Maria, Méliès's studio was glass-sided, like a greenhouse, and admitted sunlight from many directions (12.12). G. Albert Smith's *Santa Claus* (1898) was filmed in the open air, with a false backdrop (12.13). It displays typical traits of the first fictional narratives: distant camera position, flat lighting, and a rear wall placed perpendicular to the camera lens.



12.13

the dominant industrial force in film production. In some countries, filmmakers responded by creating movements that differed sharply from the look and feel of the American product.

The Development of the Classical Hollywood Cinema (1908–1927)

Edison, determined to make money from his invention, brought patent-violation suits against competing moviemaking firms. When he failed to stamp out his rivals, he allied with several of them in 1908 to establish the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC). Edison and the American Mutoscope and Biograph company were the only stockholders and patent owners. They licensed other members to make, distribute, and exhibit films, and they standardized film lengths at one reel (running about 15 minutes). But this move didn't eliminate the other production companies, who sprang up quickly. In 1912 the U.S. government sued the MPPC, and three years later it was declared a monopoly and forced to break up.

Hollywood and the Studio System of Production

At the same period, both MPPC companies and independents began to relocate from New York and Chicago to California. Los Angeles offered a climate that permitted shooting year-round, and a great variety of locations—mountains, ocean, desert, city. Soon Hollywood and other small towns on the outskirts of Los Angeles hosted film production.

Through the 1910s and 1920s, the smaller firms merged to form the large film corporations that still exist today. Famous Players joined with Jesse L. Lasky and then formed a distribution wing, Paramount. By the late 1920s, most of the major companies—MGM (a merger of Metro, Goldwyn, and Mayer), Fox Film Corporation (merged with 20th Century in 1935), Warner Bros., Universal, and Paramount—had been created. Though in competition with one another, the companies cooperated to some degree, because they realized that the demand for films was so great that no one firm could satisfy the market.

By the early 1920s, the American industry had created a structure that would continue for decades. A few large firms with individual artists under contract were supplemented by small independent producing companies. Within a company,

filmmaking tasks were carefully divided among specialists, and each project was overseen by a producer, who kept an eye on budget and schedule. Thomas Ince, a major producer, pioneered the use of detailed shooting scripts and time sheets so that the shooting could be cost-efficient. The stages of production we surveyed in Chapter 1 (pp. 17–29) were systematized by the Hollywood companies of the late 1910s. This business model came to be known as the studio system. Aiming to turn out films in large quantities, the American cinema became oriented toward narrative form.

Narrative Continuity: Early Prototypes One of Edison's directors, Edwin S. Porter, made some of the first films to use narrative continuity and development. Among these was *The Life of an American Fireman* (1903), which showed the race of the firefighters to rescue a mother and a child from a burning house. Although this film used several striking narrative elements (a fireman's premonition of the disaster, a series of shots of the horse-drawn engine racing to the house), the cutting presents an odd time scheme. We see the rescue of a mother and her child twice, from both inside and outside the house. Porter had not realized the possibility of intercutting the two locales to sustain simultaneous action.

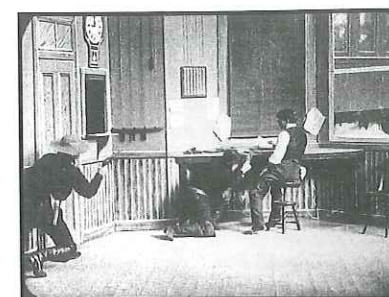
In 1903, Porter made *The Great Train Robbery*, in some ways a prototype for the classical American film. Here the action develops with a linear time, space, and cause-effect logic. We follow each stage of the robbery (12.14), the pursuit, and the final defeat of the robbers. In 1905, Porter also created a simple parallel narrative in *The Kleptomaniac*, contrasting the fates of a rich woman and a starving woman who are both caught stealing.

British filmmakers were working along similar lines. Indeed, many historians now believe that Porter derived some of his editing techniques from films such as James Williamson's *Fire!* (1901) and G. A. Smith's *Mary Jane's Mishap* (1903). The most famous British film of this era was Lewin Fitzhamon's 1905 film *Rescued by Rover* (produced by a major British firm, Cecil Hepworth), which treated a kidnapping in a linear fashion similar to that of *The Great Train Robbery*. After the kidnapping, we see each stage of Rover's journey to find the child, his return to fetch the child's father, and their retracing of the route to the kidnapper's lair. All the shots make the geography of the action completely intelligible (12.15, 12.16).

In 1908, D. W. Griffith began his directing career. Over the next five years, he would make hundreds of one- and two-reelers (running about 15 and 30 minutes, respectively). These films created relatively complex plots in short spans. Griffith certainly didn't invent all the devices with which he has been credited, but he did give many techniques strong narrative motivation. For example, a few other filmmakers had used simple last-minute rescues with crosscutting between the rescuers and victims, but Griffith developed and popularized this technique (6.111–6.114). By the time he made *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Intolerance* (1916), Griffith was creating lengthy sequences by cutting among several different locales.

Griffith made another creative choice that was unusual for the early 1910s: He concentrated on subtle changes in facial expression (4.33). To catch such nuances, he set up his camera closer to the action than did many of his contemporaries, framing his actors in medium long shot or medium shot.

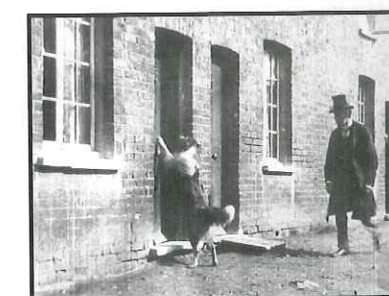
Griffith's films were widely influential. In addition, his dynamic, rapid editing in the final chase scenes of *Intolerance* was to have a considerable impact on the Soviet Montage style of the 1920s. But he wasn't alone in refining technique. Supervising production at his company, Thomas Ince demanded tight narratives, with no digressions or loose ends, and his request for detailed shooting scripts favored breaking scenes up into several camera positions. Films made under Ince's control, such as *Civilization* (1915), *The Italian* (1915),



12.14 An early effort at narrative continuity. The robbers in the telegraph office in *The Great Train Robbery*, preparing to board the train seen through the window. The train portion of the image is an early matte shot.



12.15



12.16

12.15–12.16 Matching screen direction. In *Rescued by Rover*, the heroic dog leads his master along a street from the right rear moving toward the left foreground (12.15). The pair is moving from right to left as they reach their destination (12.16).



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For an international survey of the important year 1913, see "Lucky '13," and for a look at alternatives to continuity editing, see "Looking different today?" We examine the work of two early French masters in "Capellani trionfante" and "How to watch *Fantômas*, and why."

“The cinema knows so well how to tell a story that perhaps there is an impression that it has always known how.”

—André Gaudreault, film historian



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A Spanish filmmaking student created a revealing video analyzing a 1912 Griffith Biograph short. We talk about the analysis and link to it in "A variation on a sunbeam."



12.17



12.18

12.17–12.18 Narrative coherence. The opening scene of *The Cheat* introduces the branding motif (12.17). It returns later when the villain brands the heroine as another item of property (12.18). Both use the “Rembrandt lighting” that made De Mille famous.

and the Westerns of William S. Hart (p. 337), helped stabilize the emerging continuity conventions.

Cecil B. De Mille, a director who was to have a much longer career than Griffith and Ince, made several feature-length dramas and comedies. His *The Cheat* (1915) reflects important changes occurring in the studio style between 1914 and 1917. During that period, the glass-roofed studios using daylight for illumination gave way to studios dependent on artificial lighting. *The Cheat* used spectacular effects of chiaroscuro, with only one or two bright sources of light and no fill light. According to legend, De Mille justified this effect to nervous exhibitors by calling it “Rembrandt lighting.” This north lighting was to become part of the classical repertoire of lighting techniques.

Like many American films of the teens, *The Cheat* uses a linear pattern of narrative. The first scene (12.17) quickly establishes the Japanese businessman as a ruthless collector of objects; we see him burning his brand onto a small statue. The initial action motivates a later scene in which the businessman brands the heroine, who has fallen into his power by borrowing money from him (12.18). *The Cheat* was one of several 1915 films that showed that Hollywood films were moving toward greater complexity in their storytelling.

The 180° system of staging, shooting, and editing (pp. 231–233) was developing as well. Eyeline matches became more common from 1910 on, and the match on action was in common use by 1916. Shot/reverse-shot cutting became widespread as well, as seen in *The Cheat* (1915), Hart’s Western *The Narrow Trail* (1917), and Griffith’s *A Romance of Happy Valley* (1919).

Classical Form and Style in Place

By the early 1920s, the continuity system had become a standardized style that directors in the Hollywood studios used to create coherent, gripping storytelling. Screen direction was usually respected. A match on action could provide a cut to a closer view in a scene (12.19, 12.20). A conversation around a table would no longer be handled in a single frontal shot (12.21–12.25). When an awkward match might have resulted from the joining of two shots, the filmmakers could cover it by inserting a dialogue title.

Filmmakers conceived ways to handle large-scale narrative form as well. By 1923, Buster Keaton could construct a perfectly balanced plot for *Our Hospitality*. As we saw in Chapter 4, the action develops logically from the death of Willie McKay’s father to Willie’s final resolution of the feud. Along the way, motifs like the railroad tracks, water, and pistols are carefully motivated and ingeniously varied.



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On two of the most important filmmakers of the early classical period, see our entries on William S. Hart in “Rio Jim, in discrete fragments,” and Douglas Fairbanks in “His Majesty the American.”

“That evening I tried to increase my knowledge of motion-picture technique by going to the movies. I sat with a stop watch and notebook and tried to estimate the number of cuts or scenes in a thousand-foot reel, the length of individual scenes, the distance of the subject from the camera, and various other technical details.”

—King Vidor, director, recalling the night before he began directing his first film, c. 1912



12.19

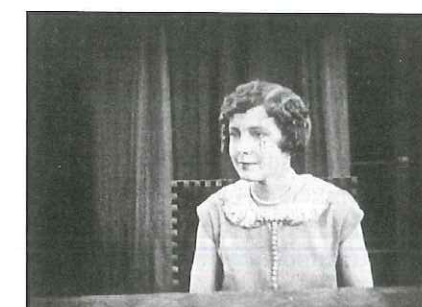


12.20

12.19–12.20 Smooth action matching in the early 1920s. In Fred Niblo’s *The Three Musketeers* (1921), a long shot of the group (12.19) leads to a cut-in to the central character, played by Douglas Fairbanks (12.20).



12.21



12.22



12.23



12.24



12.25

12.21–12.25 Consistent eyelines around a table. In an establishing shot from *Are Parents People?* (Malcolm St. Clair, 1925), the daughter sits down at the table (12.21). In the medium shot she looks leftward toward her father (12.22). He responds to her by looking rightward in the reverse shot (12.23). The daughter then turns to look to the right at her mother (12.24). Her mother returns her gaze in reverse shot (12.25).

In only a decade or so, Hollywood cinema had developed into a sophisticated cinematic tradition. As we’ve indicated (p. 230), classical continuity became a kind of universal language of fictional moviemaking that’s still in force today. Yet no sooner had the tradition crystallized than alternatives began to appear. Filmmakers in other countries pushed in directions that American cinema had not explored. After examining these alternative movements, in the silent era, we’ll return to consider the classical Hollywood cinema after the coming of sound.

German Expressionism (1919–1926)

The worldwide success of American films in the late 1910s and through the 1920s confronted filmmakers abroad with a harsh choice. Should they try to imitate Hollywood? The big budgets of the American studios were hard to match in the aftermath of a war that had devastated the European continent. Or should they try to offer a type of cinema markedly different from the Hollywood standard? Most



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For more on the emergence of Hollywood film style in the late 1910s, see “Happy birthday, classical cinema!” We also have a video lecture, “How Motion Pictures Became the Movies, 1908–1920” that considers this period.



12.26 The UFA historical epic. *Madame Dubarry*: A crowd scene in the Tribunal of the French Revolution.

filmmakers took the first option and adopted American techniques of lighting, staging, and editing. (Principles of story construction took longer to be adopted.) But a few filmmakers sought to be more original, and some of them formed movements that had an enduring effect on world cinema.

In 1914, although some impressive pictures had been made in Germany, the industry's output was relatively small. The nation's 2,000 movie theaters were playing mostly French, American, Italian, and Danish films. When the war began, America and France banned German films from their screens immediately, but Germany couldn't afford to ban French and American films, for then the theaters would have had little to show.

To combat imported competition, as well as to create its own propaganda films, the German government began to support the film industry. In 1916, film imports were banned except from neutral Denmark. Production increased rapidly; from a dozen small companies in 1911, the number grew to 131 by 1918. But government policy encouraged these companies to band together into cartels.

In late 1917, the government, the Deutsche Bank, and large industrial concerns combined several small film firms to create the large company UFA (short for Universum Film Aktiengesellschaft). Backed by these conservative interests, UFA was a move toward control of the German market and, its backers hoped, the postwar international market as well. With this huge financial backing, UFA was able to gather superb technicians and build the best-equipped studios in Europe.

One tactic UFA tried was making big-budget spectacle films that could rival Hollywood's effort. This proved successful. Ernst Lubitsch's *Madame Dubarry* (1919; 12.26), a historical epic of the French Revolution, broke down international opposition to German films. Although the French authorities treated it as propaganda, it proved extremely popular elsewhere and helped reopen the world market for local films. Other Lubitsch historical films were soon exported, and in 1923, he became the first German director to be hired by Hollywood.

A more unusual strategy of differentiation emerged at the same time. Despite UFA's expansion, some small companies remained independent. Among these was Erich Pommer's Decla (later Decla-Bioscop). In 1919, the firm undertook to produce an unconventional script by two unknowns, Carl Mayer and Hans Janowitz. These young writers wanted their story to be told in an unusually stylized way. The three designers assigned to the film—Hermann Warm, Walter Reimann, and Walter Röhrig—suggested that it be done in an Expressionist style. As an avant-garde movement, Expressionism had first been important in painting (starting about 1910) and had been quickly taken up in theater, then in literature and architecture. Pommer consented to try it in the cinema, apparently believing that this might be a selling point in the international market. This belief was vindicated in 1920 when Decla's low-budget *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) created a sensation in Berlin and then in the United States, France, and other countries.

Thanks to the success of *Caligari*, UFA, along with smaller companies, invested in Expressionist films because these could compete with Hollywood.

The first film of the movement, *Caligari*, is a powerful example of the Expressionist style. One of its designers, Warm, claimed, "The film image must become graphic art." With its extreme stylization, *Caligari* was like a moving Expressionist painting or woodcut print. In contrast to French Impressionism, which based its style primarily on cinematography and editing, German Expressionism depended heavily on mise-en-scene. Shapes are distorted and exaggerated to suggest emotional states. Actors often wear heavy makeup and move in jerky or slow,

“Everything is composition; any image whatsoever could be stopped on the screen and would be a marvellously balanced painting of forms and lights. Also, it is one of the films which leaves in our memories the clearest visions—precise and of a slightly static beauty. But even more than painting, it is animated architecture.”

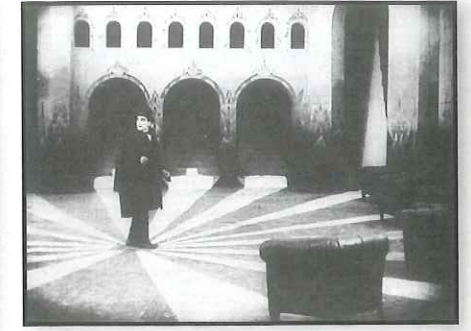
—François Berge, French critic, on Fritz Lang's *The Nibelungen*



12.27



12.28



12.29

12.27–12.29 Actors as part of setting. In Robert Wiene's *Genuine*, the bedroom is flamboyantly Expressionist. As the heroine leans backwards, she blends in with the curved, spiky shapes behind her (12.27). *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*: Dr. Caligari totters along a corridor that suggests a madman's vision of the world (12.28). When the hero arrives at Caligari's asylum, he steps into the center of a pattern of black-and-white lines that radiate across the floor and up the walls (12.29).

sinuous patterns. Most important, all of the elements of the mise-en-scene interact graphically to create an overall composition. We have already seen an example of this in 4.117, where the character Cesare collapses in a stylized forest, his body and outstretched arms echoing the shapes of the trees' trunks and branches. Characters do not simply exist within a setting but rather form visual elements that *merge with* the setting (12.27).

Such a departure from realism demands motivation, which *Caligari* provides through mental subjectivity. We see the world as the mad hero imagines it to be (12.28). This narrative function of the settings becomes explicit at one point, when the hero enters an asylum in his pursuit of Caligari. As he pauses to look around, the world of the film is literally a projection of the hero's mind (12.29).

Later, as Expressionism became an accepted style, filmmakers didn't motivate the style as the subjective state of mad characters. Instead, genre conventions were invoked. Expressionist design could create stylized imagery for fantasy and horror stories, as with *Waxworks* (1924) and *Nosferatu* (1922; see 9.18). *The Nibelungen* (1923–1924) showed that abstract patterning of costume, sets, and crowds could be applied to historical epics as well.

By the mid-1920s, German films were regarded as among the best in the world. UFA's rich studio facilities attracted foreign filmmakers, including the young Alfred Hitchcock. During the 1920s, Germany coproduced many films with companies in other countries, thus spreading its stylistic influence abroad. The rampant inflation of the early 1920s actually favored Expressionist filmmaking, partly by making it easy for exporters to sell German films cheaply overseas. Inflation discouraged imports as well, because the tumbling exchange rate of the mark made foreign purchases too expensive.

In 1924, the U.S. Dawes Plan helped to stabilize the German economy, and foreign films came in more frequently, offering a degree of competition unknown in Germany for nearly a decade. Expressionist film budgets, meanwhile, were climbing. The last major films of the movement, F. W. Murnau's *Faust* (1926) and Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927; see 12.30), were costly epics that drove UFA deeper into financial difficulty. Erich Pommer quit and tried his luck briefly in America. Other personnel were lured away to Hollywood as well. Trying to counter the stiffer competition, the Germans began to imitate the American product. The resulting films, though sometimes impressive, diluted the unique qualities of the Expressionist style.

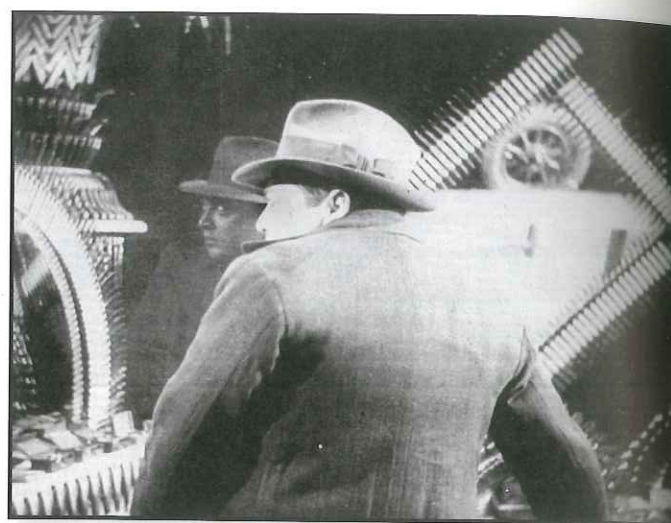
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For many years, incomplete versions of *Metropolis* circulated. In 2008 nearly all the long-lost footage was finally discovered. We tell the story and assess how the new scenes changed the film in "Metropolis unbound."



12.30

12.30–12.31 Lang sustains Expressionism. *Metropolis* contained many large, Expressionistic sets, including this garden, with pillars that appear to be made of melting clay (12.30). In *M*, reflections and a display of knives in a shop window create a semi-abstract composition that mirrors the murderer's obsession (12.31).



12.31



12.32 Expressionism for horror-comedy. *The Afterlife* as portrayed by *Beetlejuice* recalls the contorted décor of *Caligari* (12.28).

By 1927, Expressionism as a movement had died out. But as Georges Sadoul has pointed out, an expressionist (spelled with a lowercase “e” to distinguish it from the Expressionist movement proper) tradition lingered on in many of the German films of the late 1920s and even into such 1930s films as Fritz Lang’s *M* (1930; see 12.31) and *Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1932). Some set designers came to the United States and applied techniques there. Hollywood horror and crime films sometimes displayed expressionist tendencies in their settings and lighting. Although the movement lasted only about seven years, expressionism has never entirely died out as one approach to film style, and even today directors may refer to the original German version of it (12.32).

French Impressionism and Surrealism (1918–1930)

During the silent era, a number of film movements in France posed major alternatives to the emerging Hollywood tradition. Some of these alternatives, such as abstract cinema and Dada filmmaking, weren’t specifically French and constituted instead a part of the growing international avant-garde. But two alternatives to the American mode remained quite localized.

Impressionism was an avant-garde style that operated largely within the film industry. Most of the Impressionist filmmakers started out working for major French companies, and some of their avant-garde works proved financially successful. In the mid-1920s, most formed their own independent companies but remained within the mainstream commercial industry by renting studio facilities and releasing their films through established firms. The other alternative movement, Surrealism, lay largely outside the film industry. Allied with the Surrealist movement in other arts,

these filmmakers relied on their own means and private patronage. France in the 1920s offers a striking instance of how different film movements may flourish in the same time and place.

Impressionism

World War I struck a serious blow to the French film industry. Personnel were conscripted, studios were shifted to wartime uses, and much export was halted. The two major firms, Pathé Frères and Léon Gaumont, also controlled circuits of theaters and they needed to fill vacant screens. As a result, in 1915 American films began to flood into France. Represented by De Mille’s *The Cheat* and films featuring Douglas Fairbanks, Charlie Chaplin, William S. Hart, and other popular stars, the Hollywood cinema dominated the market by the end of 1917. After the war, French filmmaking never fully recovered. The industry tried in several ways to recapture the audience, mostly through imitation of Hollywood production methods and genres. Alternatively, there emerged a movement consisting of younger directors: Abel Gance, Louis Delluc, Germaine Dulac, Marcel L’Herbier, and Jean Epstein.

Films and Feelings The previous generation had regarded filmmaking as a commercial craft, but the younger filmmakers wrote essays proclaiming cinema to be an art comparable to poetry, painting, and music. Astonished by the verve and energy of the American cinema, the young theorists compared Chaplin to a ballet dancer and the films of Hart to *The Song of Roland*. Cinema should, the young filmmakers argued, be what other arts were: a vehicle for feelings. Gance, Delluc, Dulac, L’Herbier, Epstein, and other members of the movement sought to put this idea into practice as filmmakers. Between 1918 and 1928, the younger directors experimented with cinema in ways that posed an alternative to the emerging Hollywood tradition.

The movement gained the name “Impressionist” because filmmakers wanted to give their narration subjective depth, to capture the momentary impressions that flit through a character’s mind. Believing that cinema should project heightened and subtle emotional states, the directors concentrated on intimate psychological stories. They favored situations with a small number of characters, often caught up in a love triangle, as in Gance’s *La Dixième symphonie* (1918), Delluc’s *L’Inondation* (1924), and Epstein’s *Coeur fidèle* (1923) and *La Belle nivernaise* (1923). These charged situations created fleeting moods and shifting sensations.

An Impressionist film replaces external action with an exploration of the characters’ inner life. Flashbacks depict memories; sometimes the bulk of a film will be one flashback or a series of them. The films register characters’ dreams, fantasies, and mental states. Dulac’s *The Smiling Mme. Beudet* (1923) consists almost entirely of the main character’s imaginary escape from a dull marriage. Despite its epic length (over five hours), Gance’s *La Roue* (1922) rests essentially on the erotic relations among only four people, and the director seeks to trace the development of each character’s feelings in great detail.

Subjective Style The movement earned its name as well for its distinctive film style. *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* had evoked its protagonist’s mental states through mise-en-scene, but the French relied more on cinematography and editing. In Impressionist films, optical effects such as superimpositions imply characters’ thoughts and moods (12.33). In *La Roue*, the image of Norma is laid over the smoke from a locomotive, representing the fantasy of the engine driver, who is in love with her. Going beyond mental subjectivity, the filmmakers try to register characters’ optical impressions as well. POV cutting is common, and so are shots suggesting altered states of perception. When a character in an Impressionist film gets drunk or dizzy, that experience is rendered in vertiginous camera movements, or slow motion, or distorted or filtered shots (12.34).

“Another period arrived, that of the psychological and impressionist film. It would seem stupid to place a character in a given situation without penetrating into the secret realm of his inner life, and the actor’s performance is explained by the play of thoughts and of visualized sensations.”

—Germaine Dulac, director



12.33



12.34

12.33–12.34 Cinematography for subjectivity. In *Coeur fidèle*, the barmaid looks out a window, and a superimposition of the flotsam of the waterfront conveys her dejection at working in a dockside tavern (12.33). In *El Dorado*, a man’s tipsiness in a cabaret is conveyed by means of a curved mirror that stretches his body sideways (12.34).



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We discuss some major Impressionist films on DVD in “Albatros soars.”



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We consider the heritage of Expressionism and Impressionism in the work of Martin Scorsese, including *Taxi Driver* and *Shutter Island*, in “Scorsese, ‘pressionist.”

The Impressionists also experimented with pronounced rhythmic editing to suggest the pace of an experience as a character feels it, moment by moment. During scenes of violence or emotional turmoil, the rhythm accelerates—the shots get shorter and shorter, building to a climax, sometimes with images only a few frames long. In *Coeur fidèle*, lovers at a fair ride in whirling swings, and Epstein presents their giddiness in a series of shots 4 frames, then 2 frames, long. In *La Roue*, a train crash is presented in accelerating shots ranging from 13 frames down to 2, and a man’s last thoughts before he falls from a cliff are rendered in a hail of single-frame shots. We’ve seen this pattern of accelerated editing in *The Birds* (p. 222), but these passages from *La Roue* are the first known instances of it.

Impressionist form and style put demands on film technology. Abel Gance, the boldest innovator in this respect, used his epic *Napoléon* (1927) as a chance to try new lenses (even a 275mm telephoto), multiple-frame images (called Polyvision), and widescreen ratio (the celebrated triptychs; see 5.70). Impressionists were especially interested in frame mobility. After all, if the camera was to represent a character’s eyes, it should be able to move with the ease of a person. Impressionists strapped their cameras to cars, carousels, and locomotives. For Gance’s *Napoléon*, the camera manufacturer Debrie perfected a handheld model that let the operator move on roller skates. Gance lashed the machine to wheels, cables, pendulums, and bobsleds. In *L’Argent* (1928), L’Herbier sent his camera gliding through huge rooms and plummeting down from the dome of the Paris stock exchange (12.35).

Such innovations had given French filmmakers the hope that their films could be as popular as Hollywood’s product. Some Impressionist films did appeal to the French public, but foreign audiences weren’t attracted. Two behemoth productions of the decade, *Napoléon* and *L’Argent*, failed and were reedited by the producers; they were among the last Impressionist films released. With the arrival of the sound film, the French film industry tightened its belt and had no money to risk on experiments.

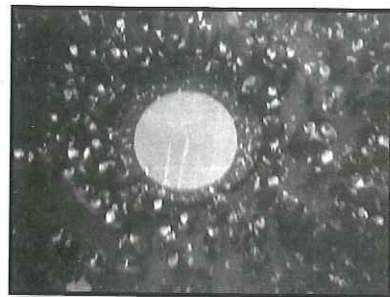
Impressionism as a distinct movement may be said to have ceased by 1929. But the filmmakers’ explorations of psychological narrative and subjective style became a legacy to future generations. These innovations continued in the work of Alfred Hitchcock and Maya Deren, in Hollywood montage sequences, and in certain American genres and styles (the horror film, film noir). Even today, when a director wants to convey what a character is sensing or feeling in some abnormal state of mind, Impressionist techniques of camerawork and editing—blurred imagery, superimposition, slow motion, accelerating cutting—prove to be common choices (12.36; see also 3.42, from *The Road Warrior*).

Surrealism

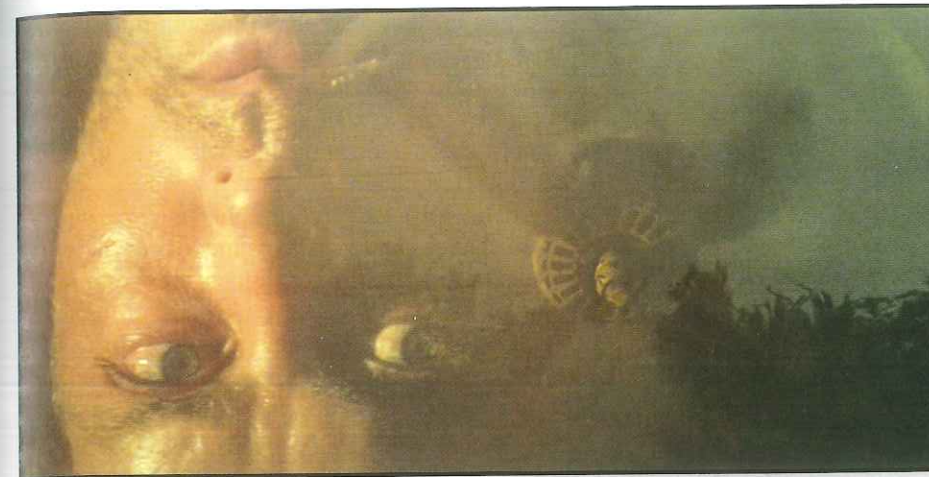
The French Impressionist filmmakers worked within the commercial film industry, but Surrealist filmmakers relied on private patronage and screened their work in small artists’ gatherings. Not surprisingly, Surrealist cinema was a more radical movement, producing films that would perplex and shock ordinary audiences.

Surrealist cinema was directly linked to Surrealism in literature and painting. According to its leader, André Breton, “Surrealism [is] based on the belief in the superior reality of certain forms of association, heretofore neglected, in the omnipotence of dreams, in the undirected play of thought.” The Impressionist filmmakers sought to catch the flow of consciousness as a tumble of sensations and memories. But Surrealist art, influenced by Freudian psychology, wanted to go deeper. Surrealists wanted to plumb the hidden currents of the unconscious.

Automatic writing and painting, the search for bizarre or evocative imagery, the deliberate avoidance of rationally explicable form or style: These became



12.35 The dizzying crane shot. In *L’Argent*, the camera drops toward the floor of the stock exchange in an effort to convey the traders’s frenzied excitement.



12.36 Camerawork for hallucination. Impressionists would probably have admired the opening of *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Superimpositions, striking compositions, and the mixing of sounds and images of battle with the whirring of the overhead fan—all take us into Willard’s mind.

features of Surrealism as it developed in the period 1924–1929. From the start, the Surrealists were attracted to the cinema, especially films that presented untamed desire or the fantastic and marvelous. They admired slapstick comedies, *Nosferatu*, and serials about mysterious super-criminals. In due time, painters such as Man Ray and Salvador Dalí and writers such as Antonin Artaud began dabbling in cinema, while the young Spaniard Luis Buñuel, drawn to Surrealism, became its most famous filmmaker.

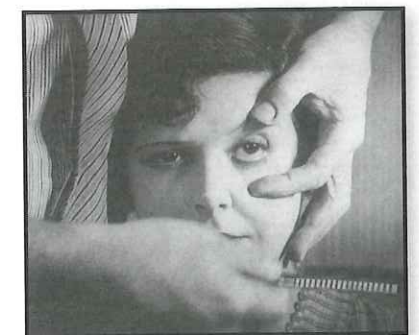
Hollywood filmmakers, the Expressionists, and the Impressionists were all committed to storytelling, even if their methods differed. But Surrealist cinema was anti-narrative, attacking causality and coherence. If rationality is to be fought, connections among events must be dissolved, as in *The Seashell and the Clergyman* (1928—scripted by Artaud, filmed by the Impressionist Germaine Dulac; 12.37). In Dalí and Buñuel’s *Un Chien andalou* (*An Andalusian Dog*, 1928), the hero drags two pianos, stuffed with dead donkeys, across a parlor. In Buñuel’s *L’Age d’or* (1930), a woman begins obsessively sucking the toes of a statue.

But even while banishing causality, many Surrealist films tease us to find it. It becomes as evasive as in a dream. Instead, we find events juxtaposed for their disturbing effect. The hero gratuitously shoots a child (*L’Age d’or*), a woman closes her eyes only to reveal eyes painted on her eyelids (Ray’s *Emak Bakia*, 1927), and—most horrifying of all—a man strops a razor and deliberately slits the eyeball of an unprotesting woman (12.38). An Impressionist film would motivate such events as a character’s dreams or hallucinations, but in these films, character psychology can’t be determined. Sexual desire, violence, blasphemy, and bizarre humor take the place of conventional narrative. The hope was that the free form of the film would arouse the deepest impulses of the viewer, even if those impulses were unsavory. Buñuel called *Un Chien andalou* “a passionate call to murder.”

The style of Surrealist cinema is eclectic. Mise-en-scene is often influenced by Surrealist painting. The ants in *Un Chien andalou* come from Dalí’s pictures; the pillars and city squares of *The Seashell and the Clergyman* hark back to the Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico. Surrealist editing is an amalgam of some Impressionist devices (many dissolves and superimpositions) and some devices of the dominant cinema. The shocking eyeball-slitting at the start of *Un Chien andalou* relies on continuity editing as well as the Kuleshov effect (p. 226). However, discontinuous editing is also commonly used to fracture space and time. In *Un Chien andalou*, a



12.37



12.38

12.37–12.38 Surrealists’ irrational imagery. *The Seashell and the Clergyman*: the clergyman’s distorted view of a threatening military officer, inexplicably dressed in baby’s clothes (12.37). A shocking eye-slitting scene opens *Un Chien andalou* (12.38).



12.39 Surrealism's heritage. The mysterious ear, discolored and covered with ants, discovered at the opening of *Blue Velvet* (1986) recalls *Un Chien andalou*.

woman locks a man out of a room only to turn and find him inexplicably behind her. On the whole, Surrealist film style refused to define itself by any particular techniques, since that would order and rationalize what had to be an “undirected play of thought.”

The fortunes of Surrealist cinema shifted with changes in the art movement as a whole. By late 1929, when Breton joined the Communist Party, Surrealists were embroiled in internal dissension about whether communism was a political equivalent of Surrealism. Buñuel left France for a brief stay in Hollywood and then returned to Spain. The chief patron of Surrealist

filmmaking, the Vicomte de Noailles, supported Jean Vigo's *Zéro de Conduite* (1933), a film of Surrealist ambitions, but then stopped sponsoring the avant-garde. As a unified movement, French Surrealism was no longer viable after 1930.

Individual Surrealists continued their efforts, however. The most famous was Buñuel, who continued to work in his own brand of the Surrealist style for 50 years, in films such as *Belle de Jour* (1967) and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). He was followed by other filmmakers, including the avant-gardist Kenneth Anger. Similarly, David Lynch's *Blue Velvet*, *Lost Highway*, and *Mulholland Dr.* owe a good deal to Breton's demand to plumb the unconscious mind “in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and beyond any aesthetic and moral preoccupation” (12.39).

Soviet Montage (1924–1930)

Few artists were as determined to shake up filmmaking as the men and women who came of age during the Russian Revolution of October 1917. In all the arts, the call went out for a new way of seeing, and the creation of an art that would reflect Communist social ideals. The film world was galvanized by young people who scorned the current customs. They wanted to forge a cinema that would be revolutionary in subject, theme, form, and style. They wanted to provide filmmakers with brand-new tools.

Most Russian films made before the revolution were somber, slow-paced melodramas featuring bravura performances by popular stars (12.40). The dominant style favored long takes and intricate staging. One master of the period was Yevgenii Bauer, who brought pictorial elegance to tales of flirtation and betrayal among the upper classes. (See 4.131–4.134.) The young filmmakers, fascinated by continuity editing and the extroverted, athletic performance style in Westerns and comedies, saw the Hollywood style as the cutting-edge approach. But the aspiring directors didn't simply copy the American methods. They pushed them to the limit, in the process creating a new and distinctive set of filmmaking tools.

Artists and the State

The government aimed to remake all sectors of life. At first, policy makers tried to nationalize all private property. In response, film companies simply refused to supply films to theaters operating under the government control. In July 1918, the State Commission of Education put strict controls on the existing supplies of raw film stock. As a result, producers began hoarding their stock; the largest firms took all the equipment they could and fled to other countries. Some companies made films commissioned by the government, while hoping that the Reds would lose the Civil War and that things would return to pre-Revolutionary conditions.



12.40 The tsarist style. In Yakov Protazanov's 1916 *The Queen of Spades*, the gambling-addicted hero, played by the popular Ivan Mozhukin, imagines himself winning at cards, with his vision superimposed at the right.



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We analyze Bauer's masterful staging in his upper-class melodramas in “Watching movies very, very slowly” and “What's left to discover today? Plenty.”

Like other Soviet industries, film production and distribution took years to build up a substantial output. To fill the void in theaters, American films, particularly those of D. W. Griffith, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford, circulated for years. They became a tremendous influence on young filmmakers.

Faced with little equipment and difficult living conditions, a few young filmmakers made tentative moves that would result in the development of a national cinema movement. Dziga Vertov shot documentary footage of the war; at age 20, he was placed in charge of all newsreels. Lev Kuleshov, in his early 20s, was teaching in the newly founded State School on Cinema Art. There he built up a series of experiments by assembling footage, some that he shot, some from existing films, into short segments that created an impression of continuity (pp. 225–226). Kuleshov, perhaps the most conservative of the young Soviet filmmakers, tried to systematize principles of editing based on the emerging Hollywood style. Even before they were able to make films, Kuleshov and his young pupils were working at the first film school in the world and writing theoretical essays on the new art form. This grounding in theory would be the basis of the Montage style.

Other young people moved into cinema, often from scientific backgrounds. The engineer Sergei Eisenstein began directing plays in a workers' theater in Moscow. For one 1923 production he made a short film, and soon he was directing a feature. Vsevolod Pudovkin, trained in chemistry, made his acting debut in a play presented by Kuleshov's State Film School. He had been inspired to go into filmmaking by seeing Griffith's *Intolerance*, and he would make his first feature a few years later. Some tsarist-era directors, Protozanov, for example, would continue to work under the Soviet regime, but the breakthroughs came from newcomers.

NEP Cinema

Circumstances favored their rise. By 1921, the country was facing tremendous problems, not least a widespread famine. To facilitate the production and distribution of goods, Lenin instituted the New Economic Policy (NEP), which for several years permitted private management of business and a measure of free enterprise. For film, the NEP meant a sudden reappearance of film stock and equipment. Slowly, Soviet production began to grow as private firms made more films.

“Of all the arts, for us the cinema is the most important,” Lenin stated in 1922. Since Lenin saw film as a powerful tool for education, the first films encouraged by the government were documentaries such as Vertov's newsreel series *Kino-Pravda*. Soviet fictional films were being made from 1917 on, but it was not until 1923 that a Georgian feature, *Red Imps*, became the first Soviet film to compete successfully with the foreign films dominating local screens. And not until 1927 did the industry's income from its own films top that of the films it imported.

The NEP brought forth a burst of fresh, daring films from the youngsters. From Kuleshov's class at the State Film School came *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks* (1924; 12.41). This satiric comedy, along with Kuleshov's next project, *The Death Ray* (1925), were stunningly different from the tsarist cinema—fast-paced, full of stunts, chases, and fights, and cut with the freedom of an American film. Kuleshov showed that a Soviet film could be as entertaining as the Hollywood product. Eisenstein's first feature, *Strike* (1925) mixed cartoonish satire with violent action, including a workers' massacre intercut with the slaughter of a bull. Although it wasn't seen outside the USSR until decades later, historians now consider it the first full-blown exercise in the Montage style. Eisenstein's next film, *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), came to epitomize the new movement. Stupendously successful abroad, it was praised as a masterpiece. Over the next few years, as silent cinema was coming to an end, Eisenstein, Pudovkin, Vertov, Alexander Dovzhenko, and other directors created films that became classics.

“Everyone who has had in his hands a piece of film to be edited knows by experience how neutral it remains, even though a part of a planned sequence, until it is joined with another piece, when it suddenly acquires and conveys a sharper and quite different meaning than that planned for it at the time of filming.”

—Sergei Eisenstein, director



12.41 Soviet satire. *The Extraordinary Adventures of Mr. West in the Land of the Bolsheviks*: A gang of thieves terrifies the naive American, Mr. West, by presenting him with clichéd caricatures of fierce Soviet revolutionaries.

The Priority of Editing

What was the basis of the Montage movement? In their writings and films, these directors championed editing over all other film techniques. This was a clear attack on the long-take style that had dominated earlier Russian film. Inspired by viewings of American and French Impressionist films, the young Soviet directors declared that a film's power arose not from the delicate performances of expert actors, but from the combination of shots. Through editing, they maintained, two shots give birth to a feeling or idea not present in either one. This is the insight behind Kuleshov's experiments. If you intercut different images with impassive shots of a man's face, or show a couple looking offscreen and then a shot of a building, the editing is what endows the performance with meaning. Here the Soviets went beyond their Hollywood peers, who counted on star actors to help carry the story.

"Montage," the Russian word for cutting, seemed to show the way forward for modern cinema. But not all of the young theoreticians agreed on exactly what the Montage approach to editing should be. Pudovkin, for example, believed that shots were like bricks, to be joined together to build a sequence. Eisenstein disagreed, saying that the maximum effect would be gained if the shots did not fit together perfectly, if they created a jolt for the spectator. Many filmmakers tried out discontinuities of this sort (12.42). Eisenstein also favored juxtaposing shots to create an abstract theme, as we've already seen with his use of conceptual editing in *October* (pp. 259–262). Vertov disagreed with both theorists. He disapproved of the fiction film altogether and promoted montage-based documentary cinema, as in *Man with a Movie Camera* (pp. 432–436).

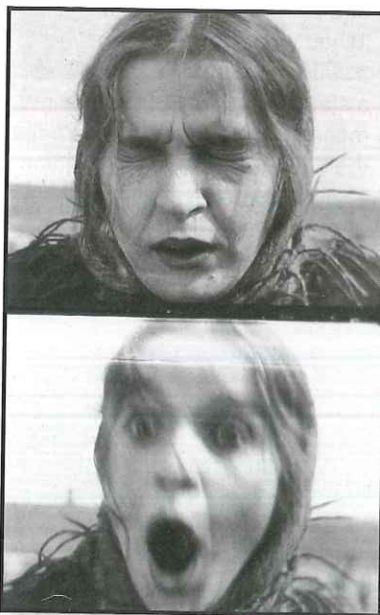
However the filmmakers might have disagreed in debate, they often converged in practice. Pudovkin's *Storm over Asia* makes use of conceptual editing similar to that of Eisenstein's *October*. Shots of a military officer and his wife being dressed in their accessories are intercut with shots of the preparation at the temple. Pudovkin's parallel montage points up the absurdity of both rituals (12.43–12.46). Elsewhere *Storm over Asia* employs many jump cuts, breaking spatial and temporal coherence for the sake of stirring the spectator's senses. American continuity style taught the Montagists the power of editing, but once they learned the lesson, they pushed the technique in radical directions that would have shocked Hollywood filmmakers.

The Montage movement went even farther beyond Hollywood in their approach to narrative. Soviet films tended to downplay character psychology as a trigger for plots; instead, social forces provided the major causes. Characters were interesting not as individuals but as examples of how large-scale processes affected people's lives. As a result, Soviet Montage films didn't always have a single protagonist. Social groups could form a collective hero, as in Eisenstein's early films. In the *October* sequence (pp. 260–262), his editing shows how social groups, such as the soldiers at the front or the women and children on the breadlines, are victimized by brutal government policies.

In keeping with this downplaying of individual personalities, Soviet filmmakers often preferred to cast non-actors. This practice was called **typage**, since the filmmakers would often choose an individual whose appearance seemed directly to convey the type of character in the role. Except for the hero, Pudovkin used non-actors to play all the Mongols in *Storm over Asia*.

The Movement Ends

By the late 1920s, each of the major directors of this movement had made about four important films. The decline of the movement was not caused primarily by industrial and economic factors, as in Germany and France. Instead, the Communist government came to disapprove of the Montage style. Vertov,



12.42 Discontinuity for shock. In *House on Trubnoi Square*, Montage director Boris Barnet uses a jump cut to convey the heroine's sudden realization that a streetcar is headed straight for her.

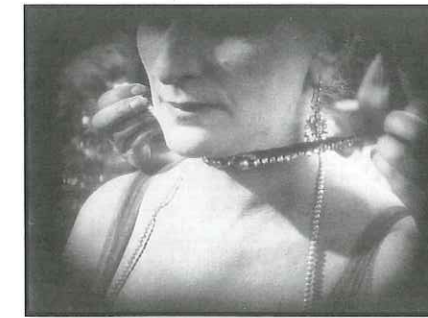


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For more on Eisenstein's approach to editing, see "Seed-beds of style."



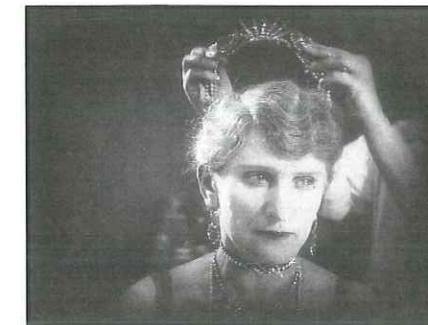
12.43



12.44



12.45



12.46

12.43–12.46 Crosscutting for thematic parallels. In *Storm over Asia*, Pudovkin shows a medium close-up of an elaborate piece of jewelry being lowered over the head of a priest (12.43). Cut to a close-up of a servant placing a necklace around the neck of the officer's wife (12.44). Cut back to a large headdress being positioned on a priest's head (12.45). Cut to a close-up of a tiara being set on the wife's head (12.46).

Eisenstein, and Dovzhenko were criticized for their excessively formal and esoteric approaches. In 1929, Eisenstein went to Hollywood to study the new technique of sound; by the time he returned in 1932, the attitude of the film industry had changed. While he was away, a few filmmakers carried their Montage experiments into sound cinema. But the Soviet authorities, under Stalin's direction, encouraged filmmakers to create simple films that would be readily understandable to all audiences. Stylistic experimentation and nonrealistic subject matter were condemned.

This trend culminated in 1934, when the government instituted a new artistic policy called Socialist Realism. This policy dictated that all artworks must depict revolutionary development while being firmly grounded in realism. The Montage theories of the 1920s had to be discarded or modified. Eisenstein continued experimenting with editing and occasionally incurred the wrath of the authorities until his death in 1948. As a movement, the Soviet Montage style can be said to have ended by 1933, with the release of such films as Vertov's *Enthusiasm* (1931) and Pudovkin's *Deserter* (1933).

Yet like other silent film movements, its legacy proved enormous. As Kuleshov and his pupils imitated American films, Hollywood borrowed Soviet strategies by creating the "montage sequences" (p. 252) that became common in the 1930s and are still used today. American filmmakers have paid homage to *The Battleship Potemkin* in movies as different as *Bananas* and *The Untouchables*. The films of Resnais, especially *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Muriel*, and *La Guerre est finie*, rework Soviet Montage principles. Even more pervasive were Montage influences on avant-garde filmmaking. Makers of found-footage films such as *A Movie* owe a good deal to Vertov's Kino-Eye, and Eisenstein's idea that discontinuity in editing was one creative option underwrote many modern experiments (12.47). The writings of the Montage directors, with their passionate call for breaking with the past, have inspired young filmmakers to make daring creative choices.



12.47 Discontinuity multiplied. Panels from old comic books, panned over jerkily and cut together disjunctively, are glimpsed in Lewis Klahr's *Two Minutes to Zero Trilogy* (2003–2004). In a test of Soviet Montage theories, we're invited to assemble the fragmentary shots into an ominous story of crime and panic.

The Classical Hollywood Cinema after the Coming of Sound (1926–1950)

The arrival of synchronized sound filming in the late 1920s dramatically shows how technological change can widen a filmmaker's creative choices. Before that, nearly all music heard in cinema was played on the spot, provided by a piano, organ, or an orchestra. Sound effects might be added; some organs could mimic pistol shots. But there would be no spoken dialogue. The silent cinema had written language in its intertitles, but not speech.

You can argue that film form and style would have been very different if cinema could have recorded spoken dialogue when movies began. Wouldn't the line of least resistance have been to simply photograph stage performances? If cinema had not been condemned to silence, would actors like Chaplin and Fairbanks have developed such a visually expressive performance style? Would Griffith and other directors have developed crosscutting and continuity editing? Would the Impressionists have tried to render the fluidity of thought, or the Soviet Montagists sought to make conceptual points through their cutting patterns? More likely, as many writers thought at the time, cinema would have become primarily a recording medium, and films would have been canned theater, like television situation comedy.

From this perspective, the absence of recorded speech was a great gift. It drastically constrained filmmakers' choices. It pushed them to find ways of telling stories visually, and the results yielded a new art form.

With the advent of synchronized sound, filmmakers faced perhaps the most important decision point in film history. Should they give up all the resources of film form and style developed over 30 years of silent moviemaking? Should they simply turn movies into photographed stage plays? Or should filmmakers try to integrate spoken language, along with music and effects, into the sophisticated visual storytelling of the late silent era? Or were there still other options? The decision would shape the future of a medium that was already still very young compared to the other arts.

Converting to Sound

Like many media technologies, synchronized sound was born from a business decision. During the mid-1920s, Warner Bros. was expanding its facilities and holdings. One of these expansions was the investment in a sound system using records in synchronization with film images. By releasing *Don Juan* (1926) with orchestral accompaniment and sound effects on disc, along with a series of vaudeville shorts with singing and talking, Warner Bros. began to popularize the idea of sound films. In 1927, *The Jazz Singer* (a part-talkie with some scenes accompanied only by music) was a tremendous success, and the Warner Bros. investment began to pay off.

The success of *Don Juan*, *The Jazz Singer*, and the shorts convinced other studios that sound contributed to profitable filmmaking. Unlike the era of the Motion Picture Patents Company, there was now no fierce competition within the industry. Firms realized that whatever sound system the studios finally adopted, it would have to be compatible with the projection machinery of any theater. Eventually, the sound-on-disc system was rejected and a sound-on-film one became the standard up to the present. As we saw in Chapter 1, the sound track was printed on the strip of film alongside the image. By 1930, most theaters in America were wired for sound. The question for filmmakers was: What to do with this new technology?

Problems and Solutions

It seemed for a few years that much of the visual storytelling of the silent era would be lost. Camera positions were more limited, because the camera had to be put inside a soundproof booth so that its motor noise would not be picked up by the

microphone (12.48). The camera operator could hear only through his earphones, and the camera could not move except for short pans to reframe. The bulky microphone, on the table at the right in 12.48, also did not move. Complicated staging was ruled out because the actors had to stay close to the microphone. Often several cameras in their booths were filming from different angles, so lighting had to be rather broad and flat; it could not be tailored to a particular shot. Such restrictions seemed to confirm critics and filmmakers' worst fears: Movies would now be static and stagey.

Still, from the very beginning of sound filming, problems were solved. When several cameras recorded the scene from different angles, the footage could be cut together to provide continuity editing patterns, complete with close-ups. A booth might be mounted on wheels to create camera movements, or a scene might be shot silent and a sound track added later. Early sound films such as Rouben Mamoulian's *Applause* (1929) showed that the camera could regain considerable flexibility of movement. Later, equipment manufacturers came up with smaller enclosures that replaced the cumbersome booths. These *blimps* (12.49) permitted cinematographers to place the camera on movable supports. Similarly, microphones mounted on booms and hanging over the heads of the actors could also follow moving action and maintain recording quality.

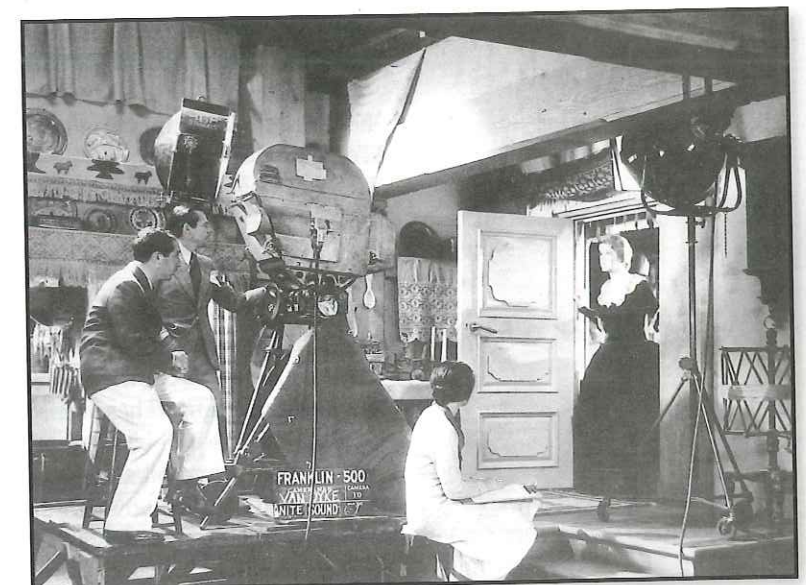
It became clear that instead of wiping out all the options of classical Hollywood form and style, recorded sound would be integrated into that system. Once cutting, camera movement, and fluid staging were restored, filmmakers returned to many of the stylistic characteristics developed in Hollywood during the silent period. Diegetic sound provided a powerful addition to the system of continuity editing. A line of dialogue could continue over a cut, creating smooth temporal continuity. (See pp. 273–275.) In addition, music could be more precisely timed to the action than was possible in live accompaniment. Max Steiner's scores for *The Most Dangerous Game* (1932) and *King Kong* (1933) showed that music could powerfully enhance both the image and spoken dialogue—sometimes amplifying frenzied action, sometimes quietly stressing a single sentence.

Studios, Genres, and Spectacle

Within the overall tradition of continuity style and classical narrative form, each of the large studios developed a distinctive approach. Thus MGM, for example, became the prestige studio, with a huge number of stars and technicians under long-term contract. MGM lavished money on settings, costumes, and special effects, as in *The Good Earth* (1937), with its locust attack, and *San Francisco* (1936),



12.48



12.49

12.48–12.49 From booth to blimp. A posed publicity still demonstrated the limitations of early sound filming (12.48). A blimped camera during the early 1930s allowed more freedom of camera placement (12.49).

“You know, when talkies first came in they were fascinated by sound—they had frying eggs and they had this and that—and then people became infatuated with the movement of the camera; I believe, the big thing right now is to move a handheld camera. I think the director and his camerawork should not intrude on the story.”

—George Cukor, director



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Some of these early sound and color films can be hard to find, but we look at some DVD collections that provide lots of information and clips in “All singing! All dancing! All teaching!”



12.50 Studios specialize in genres. Heavy shadows, spiky shapes, and eccentric performances mix a menacing atmosphere with a touch of humor in Universal's *The Old Dark House*.

in which the great earthquake of 1906 is spectacularly re-created. Warner Bros., in spite of its success with sound, was still a relatively small studio and specialized in less expensive genre pictures. Its series of gangster films (*Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy*) and musicals (*42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*, *Dames*) were among the studio's most successful products. Even lower on the ladder of prestige was Universal, which depended on imaginative filmmaking rather than established stars or expensive sets in its atmospheric horror films, such as *Frankenstein* (1931) and *The Old Dark House* (1932; **12.50**).

One major genre, the musical, became possible only with the introduction of sound. Indeed, the original intention of the Warners when they began their investment in sound equipment was to circulate vaudeville acts on film. Most musicals presented a linear plot with separate numbers inserted, although a few revue musicals simply strung together a series of numbers. One of the major studios, RKO, made a series of musicals starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers: *Swing Time* (George Stevens, 1936) illustrates how a musical can be a classically constructed narrative (see pp. 345–346).

During the 1930s, color film stocks became widely used for the first time. In the 1920s, a small number of films had Technicolor sequences, but the process was crude, using only two colors in combination to create all other hues. The result tended to emphasize greenish-blue and pink tones; it was also too costly to use extensively (**12.51**). By the early 1930s, however, Technicolor had been improved. It now used three primary colors and thus could reproduce a large range of hues. Though still expensive, it was soon proved to add hugely to the appeal of many films. After *Becky Sharp* (1935), the first feature-length film to use the new Technicolor, and *The Trail of the Lonesome Pine* (1936), studios began using Technicolor extensively. The Technicolor process was used, for either camera originals or release prints, until the early 1970s. (For examples of Technicolor, see 2.17, 2.19, 2.20, 2.22–2.25; 4.2, 4.146; 5.7; 11.101–11.113.)

Deep Focus and Narrative Innovations

Technicolor needed a great deal of light on the set, so more powerful lighting units were introduced. Some cinematographers began to use the new units for black-and-white filming. These more powerful lamps, combined with faster film stocks, made it easier to achieve greater depth of field in the image. Many cinematographers stuck to the standard soft-focus style of the 1920s and 1930s, but others began to experiment.

By the late 1930s, there was a definite trend toward a deep-focus style. It was *Citizen Kane* that in 1941 brought deep focus strongly to the attention of spectators and filmmakers. Orson Welles's compositions placed the foreground figures close to the camera and the background figures deep in the space of the shot, and all were kept in sharp focus (5.48; 8.28–8.32, 8.37–8.42). In some cases, the image was achieved through matte work and rear projection, not cinematography on the set. Overall, *Citizen Kane* helped make deep focus a major creative option within classical Hollywood style.

Directors found that depth staging and deep-focus filming allowed them to create striking compositions and to sustain scenes in longer takes (**12.52**). The light necessary for deep focus tended to lend a hard-edged appearance to objects, a look well-suited to the stories of crime and pursuit that would eventually be called *film noir*. But like every creative choice, the new technique forced fresh decisions. If an object or a face was placed close to the foreground, cinematographers found it hard to keep the composition balanced and in focus when actors moved around the shot. The most famous deep-focus shots in *Citizen Kane* and other films tend to be fixed long takes with simple staging. As a result, many deep-focus images seem more static and enclosed than the fluid performances and framings of films like *His Girl Friday* (pp. 401–404).



12.51 Two-strip Technicolor. A color sequence from *Ben-Hur* (1925) captures mostly reddish-orange and green hues.



12.52 The spread of deep-focus cinematography. Many films using the technique soon appeared. *Citizen Kane*'s cinematographer, Gregg Toland, worked on some of them, such as William Wyler's *The Little Foxes*.



12.53 Neo-noir pays homage to the past. A deep-focus composition in *The Usual Suspects* adapts Welles-Toland deep focus to the widescreen format.

During the same period, Hollywood was also broadening its narrative options. Flashbacks had been used since the 1910s, but they gained a new prominence in the 1940s. Films such as *The Long Night* (1947) and *The Big Clock* (1948) start from a point of crisis and go back in time to trace how events led up to it. Or there might be several flashbacks, threaded together by an investigation as in *Citizen Kane* or *The Killers* (1946). The flashback might replay an earlier scene, but now revealing unexpected information, as in the climax of *Mildred Pierce* (1945).

Along with flashbacks, screenwriters began experimenting with voice-over narration, already well established on radio but given a new power with the accompanying images. Both flashbacks and voice-over narration fed into a new emphasis on mental subjectivity. More than in the 1930s, films rendered dreams, hallucinations, and drunken or drug-induced visions. There are moments in *Murder, My Sweet* (1944) and *Possessed* (1947) that hark back to German Expressionism and French Impressionism, with subjective sound enhancing the imagery.

By assimilating sound and color to its system of visual storytelling, the Hollywood cinema laid the foundation of the popular film as we know it today. Later changes in technology, such as widescreen filming, multiple-track sound, computer-driven special effects, and digital capture, would build on this solid tradition (**12.53**). For decades to follow, the formal and stylistic conventions elaborated in the Hollywood studios of the 1930s and 1940s would guide the creative choices of filmmakers. Those conventions would also become targets for filmmakers who wanted to try something different.

Italian Neorealism (1942–1951)

One of the most influential movements in film history, Neorealism has somewhat diffuse origins. The label first appeared in the writings of Italian critics of the 1940s. From one perspective, the term represented a younger generation's desire to break free of the conventions of ordinary Italian cinema. Under dictator Benito Mussolini, the motion picture industry had created colossal historical epics and sentimental upper-class melodramas, and many critics felt these to be artificial and decadent. Something closer to real life was needed. Some onlookers found that quality in French films of the 1930s, especially works by Jean Renoir. Other critics turned closer to home to praise films like Luchino Visconti's *Ossessione* (1942).

Today most historians believe that Neorealist filmmaking was not a complete break with Italian cinema under Mussolini. Pseudo-documentaries such as Roberto Rossellini's *White Ship* (1941), even though propagandistic, prepared the way for more forthright handling of contemporary events. Other current trends,

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We examine deep-focus cinematography and staging in the 1930s and 1940s in "Foreground, background, playground" and "Problems, problems: Wyler's workarounds."

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We consider 1940s flashback trickery in "Twice-Told Tales: *Mildred Pierce*," which includes a video analysis.



12.54



12.55



12.56

12.54–12.56 Filming in the streets. In one scene in *Open City*, Francesco is thrown into a truck by Nazi soldiers (12.54). His common-law wife Pina breaks through the guards (12.55), and a rough, bumpy shot taken from the truck shows her running after him (12.56).

such as regional dialect comedy and urban melodrama, encouraged directors and scriptwriters to turn toward realism. Overall, spurred by both foreign influences and indigenous traditions, the postwar period saw several filmmakers aiming to reveal contemporary social conditions. This trend became known as the Neorealist movement.

Leaving the Studio

Economic, political, and cultural factors helped Neorealism survive. Unlike the young Soviet filmmakers, nearly all the major Neorealists—Rossellini, Vittorio De Sica, Visconti, and others—came to the movement as experienced filmmakers. They had absorbed lessons from Hollywood and European film traditions. They knew one another, frequently shared scriptwriters and personnel, and gained public attention in the journals *Cinema* and *Bianco e Nero*. Before 1948, the Neorealist movement had enough friends in the government to be relatively free of censorship. There was as well an affinity between Neorealism and an Italian literary movement of the same period modeled on the *verismo* of the previous century. The result was an array of Italian films that gained worldwide recognition: Visconti's *La Terra Trema* (1947); Rossellini's *Rome Open City* (1945), *Paisan* (1946), and *Germany Year Zero* (1947); and De Sica's *Shoeshine* (1946) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948).

Neorealism created a somewhat distinctive approach to film style. By 1945, the fighting had destroyed most of Cinecittà, the large Roman studio complex, so sets were in short supply and sound equipment was rare. As a result, Neorealist mise-en-scene relied on actual locales, and its photographic work tended toward the raw roughness of documentaries. Rossellini has told of buying bits of negative stock from street photographers, so that much of *Rome Open City* was shot on film with varying photographic qualities.

Shooting on the streets and in private buildings made Italian camera operators adept at cinematography that often avoided the three-point lighting system of Hollywood (4.70–4.72). Although Neorealist films often featured famous stage or film actors, non-actors were also recruited for their realistic looks and behavior. For the adult “star” of *Bicycle Thieves*, De Sica chose a factory worker: “The way he moved, the way he sat down, his gestures with those hands of a working man and not of an actor . . . everything about him was perfect.” The Italian cinema had a long tradition of dubbing, so sound didn’t have to be recorded on site. The ability to postsynchronize dialogue permitted the filmmakers to work on location with smaller crews and to move the camera freely. With a degree of improvisational freedom in the acting and setting went a certain flexibility of framing, well displayed in the death of Pina in *Rome Open City* (12.54–12.56) and the final sequence of *Germany Year Zero*. The tracking shots through the open-air bicycle market in *Bicycle Thieves* illustrate the possibilities that the Neorealist director found in returning to location filming.

A New Model of Storytelling

Just as influential was the Neorealist sense of narrative form. Reacting against the intricate plots found in light popular cinema, the Neorealists tended to loosen up narrative relations. The earliest major films of the movement, such as *Ossessione*, *Rome Open City*, and *Shoeshine*, contain relatively conventionally organized plots (albeit with unhappy endings). But the most formally innovative Neorealist films allow the intrusion of scenes that aren’t motivated causally—that seem, in fact, to be accidents (12.57). The director may dwell on moments worth savoring for their own sake. A famous scene in De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1951) records a pregnant housemaid grinding morning coffee. Her daily routine yields its own fascination, but the effect is very different from Hollywood’s conception of what counts as drama.

Although the causes of characters’ actions are usually seen as concretely economic and political (poverty, unemployment, exploitation), the effects are often fragmentary and inconclusive. Rossellini’s *Paisan* is episodic, presenting six anecdotes of life in Italy during the Allied invasion. Often we are not told the outcome of an event, the consequence of a cause. In a harsh break with mainstream storytelling, Rossellini abruptly kills off one of his protagonists in *Rome Open City*, wiping out the film’s romance plot.

Both the porous plot structure and the narration often refuse to provide an omniscient knowledge of events. The film seems to admit that the totality of reality is simply unknowable. This is especially evident in the films’ endings. *Bicycle Thieves* concludes with the worker and his son wandering down the street, their stolen bicycle still missing, their future uncertain. *La Terra Trema* concludes with the suppression of the Sicilian fishermen’s revolt against the merchants, but it hints that a future revolt might succeed. Neorealism’s tendency toward slice-of-life plot construction gave many films of the movement an open-ended quality quite opposed to the tidy wrapup favored by American studio cinema.

The Movement’s End and Its Legacy

As economic and cultural forces had sustained the Neorealist movement, so they helped bring it to an end. When Italy began to prosper after the war, the government looked askance at films so critical of contemporary society. After 1949, censorship and state pressures began to constrain the movement. Large-scale Italian film production began to reappear, and Neorealism no longer had the freedom permitted by small production companies. Neorealist directors, now famous, began to pursue more individualized concerns: Rossellini’s investigation of Christian humanism and Western history, De Sica’s sentimental romances, and Visconti’s examination of upper-class milieus. Most historians date the end of the Neorealist movement with the public attacks on De Sica’s *Umberto D* (1951). Nevertheless, Neorealist elements are still quite visible in the early works of Federico Fellini (*I Vitelloni*, 1954, is a good example) and Michelangelo Antonioni (*Cronaca di un amore*, 1951); both directors had worked on Neorealist films. Neorealist impulses periodically returned to Italian cinema, notably in the long career of Ermanno Olmi (*Il Posto*, *The Tree of the Wooden Clogs*).

The production strategies and artistic goals of this movement opened up a vast realm of creative choices. Throughout Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia, filmmakers followed the Neorealist model in rejecting polished studio production values. They realized that they could cast non-actors and let them perform in actual settings. They could rely on available light for shooting. Their screenplays didn’t need intricate plotting and could incorporate the accidents and digressions of everyday life. The plot could even leave the story action unresolved at the end, the better to provoke the audience to weigh possible outcomes. The tenets of Neorealist theory and practice have formed a robust tradition for decades of non-Hollywood cinema. Today, filmmakers in many places continue to devise their own versions of Neorealism (12.58).

The French New Wave (1959–1964)

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw the rise of a new generation of filmmakers around the world. In country after country, there emerged directors born before World War II but grown to adulthood in the postwar era of reconstruction



12.57 The drama of accident. In *Bicycle Thieves*, the hero takes shelter along with a group of priests during a rain shower. The incident doesn’t affect the plot and seems as casual as any moment in daily life.

“The sentiment of [*Bicycle Thieves*] is expressed overtly. The feelings invoked are a natural consequence of the themes of the story and the point of view it is told from. It is a politically committed film, fueled by a quiet but burning passion. But it never lectures. It observes rather than explains.”

—Sally Potter, director, *Orlando*



12.58 Neorealism’s legacy. Iranian filmmakers continue the Neorealist impulse: casual, anecdotal plots using non-actors to present social criticism. Samira Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple* (1988) was based on a real incident, in which an unemployed father locked up his daughter for several years. The little girls and other family members played themselves.

and rising prosperity. Japan, Canada, England, Italy, Spain, Brazil, and the United States all had their new waves or young cinema groups—some trained in film schools, many allied with specialized film magazines, most in revolt against their elders in the industry. The most influential of these groups appeared in France.

Critics Become Moviemakers

In the mid-1950s, a group of young men who wrote for the Paris film journal *Cahiers du cinéma* made a habit of attacking the most artistically respected French filmmakers of the day. “I consider an adaptation of value,” wrote François Truffaut, “only when written by a *man of the cinema*. Aurenche and Bost [the leading scriptwriters of the time] are essentially literary men and I reproach them here for being contemptuous of the cinema by underestimating it.” Addressing 21 major directors, Jean-Luc Godard was more insulting: “Your camera movements are ugly because your subjects are bad, your casts act badly because your dialogue is worthless; in a word, you don’t know how to create cinema because you no longer even know what it is.” Truffaut and Godard, along with Claude Chabrol, Eric Rohmer, and Jacques Rivette, also praised directors considered somewhat outdated (Jean Renoir, Max Ophüls) or eccentric (Robert Bresson, Jacques Tati).

More important, the young men saw no contradiction in rejecting the French filmmaking establishment while loving blatantly commercial Hollywood. The young rebels of *Cahiers* claimed that in the works of certain directors—certain *auteurs* (authors)—artistry existed in the American cinema. An *auteur* usually did not literally write scripts but managed nonetheless to stamp his or her personality on studio products, transcending the constraints of Hollywood’s standardized system. Howard Hawks, Otto Preminger, Samuel Fuller, Vincente Minnelli, Alfred Hitchcock—these were more than craftsmen. Each director’s total output constituted a coherent world. Godard remarked, “We won the day in having it acknowledged in principle that a film by Hitchcock, for example, is as important as a book by Aragon. Film auteurs, thanks to us, have finally entered the history of art.”

Writing criticism didn’t satisfy these young men. They itched to make movies. Borrowing money from friends and filming on location, each started to shoot short films. By 1959, they had become a force to be reckoned with. In that year, Rivette filmed *Paris nous appartient* (*Paris Belongs to Us*); Godard made *À Bout de souffle* (*Breathless*); Chabrol made his second feature, *Les Cousins*; and in April, Truffaut’s *Les quatre cents coups* (*The 400 Blows*) won the Grand Prize at the Cannes Festival.

The novelty and youthful vigor of these directors led journalists to nickname them *la nouvelle vague*—the *New Wave*. Their output was staggering. All told, the five central directors made 32 feature films between 1959 and 1966; Godard and Chabrol made 11 apiece. So many films must of course be highly disparate, but there are enough similarities for us to identify a broadly distinctive New Wave approach to style and form.

A New Wave Style

The most obviously revolutionary quality of the New Wave films was their casual look. To proponents of the carefully polished French “cinema of quality,” the young directors must have seemed hopelessly sloppy. The New Wave directors had admired the Neorealists (especially Rossellini) and, in opposition to studio filmmaking, took as their settings actual locales in and around Paris. Shooting on location became the norm (12.59). Similarly, glossy studio lighting was replaced by available light and simple supplemental sources. Few postwar French films would have shown the dim apartments and grimy corridors featured in *Paris Belongs to Us*.



12.59 Location filming. *Les Bonnes femmes*: While a serial killer stalks them, two of the heroines sit idly at work. Like many New Wave directors, Claude Chabrol followed the Neorealists in shooting on locations like this drab appliance shop.

Cinematography changed, too. The New Wave camera moves a great deal, panning and tracking to follow characters or to explore a locale. To make mobile shots cheaply on location demanded flexible, portable equipment. Fortunately, Éclair had recently developed a lightweight camera that could be handheld. (That the Éclair had been used primarily for documentary work accorded perfectly with the realistic *mise-en-scène* of the New Wave.) New Wave filmmakers were intoxicated with the new freedom offered by the handheld camera. In *The 400 Blows*, the camera explores a cramped apartment and rides a carnival centrifuge. In *Breathless*, the cinematographer held the camera while seated in a wheelchair to follow the hero’s winding path through a travel agency (11.46).

One of the most salient features of New Wave films is their casual humor. These young men deliberately played with the medium. In Godard’s *Band of Outsiders*, the three main characters resolve to be silent for a minute, and Godard dutifully shuts off *all* the sound. In Truffaut’s *Shoot the Piano Player*, a character swears that he’s not lying: “May my mother drop dead if I’m not telling the truth.” Cut to a shot of an old lady keeling over.

Along with humor came esoteric references to other films, Hollywood or European. There are homages to admired auteurs: Godard characters allude to *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray), *Some Came Running* (Nicholas Minnelli), and “Arizona Jim” (from Renoir’s *Crime of M. Lange*). In *Les Carabiniers*, Godard parodies Lumière, and in *Vivre sa vie*, he visually quotes *La Passion de Jeanne d’Arc* (12.60, 12.61). Hitchcock is frequently cited in Chabrol’s films, and Truffaut’s *Les Mistons* re-creates a shot from a Lumière short. Such citations, the New Wave directors felt, acknowledged that cinema, like literature and painting, had lofty traditions that could be honored.

Neorealism Recast

New Wave films also pushed further the Neorealist experimentation with plot construction. In general, causal connections became quite loose. Is there actually a political conspiracy going on in *Paris Belongs to Us*? Why is Nana shot at the end of *Vivre sa vie*? In *Shoot the Piano Player*, the first sequence consists mainly of a conversation between the hero’s brother and a man he accidentally meets on the street. The passerby laments his marital problems at some length. In a Hollywood film, he would become a major character, but here he departs and never reappears.

The films often lack goal-oriented protagonists. The heroes may drift aimlessly, engage in actions on the spur of the moment, or pass the time chatting in a café or going to movies. New Wave narratives also introduce startling shifts in tone, jolting our expectations. When two gangsters kidnap the hero and his girlfriend in *Shoot the Piano Player*, the whole group begins a comic discussion of sex. Discontinuous editing further disturbs narrative continuity; this tendency reaches its limit in Godard’s jump cuts (6.151, 6.152; 11.51, 11.52).

Perhaps most important, the New Wave film typically ends ambiguously. Antoine in *The 400 Blows* reaches the sea in the last shot, but as he moves forward, Truffaut zooms in and freezes the frame, ending the film with the question of where Antoine will go from there (3.10). We’ve seen a similar lack of resolution in the final scene of *Breathless* (p. 420). In Chabrol’s *Les Bonnes Femmes* and *Ophelia*, in Rivette’s *Paris Belongs to Us*, and in nearly all the work of Godard and Truffaut in this period, the looseness of the causal chain leads to endings that remain defiantly open and uncertain.

Into the Mainstream and Beyond

The filmmakers were often bad mannered, and the films placed strong demands on the viewer, but the French film industry wasn’t hostile to the New Wave. The decade 1947–1957 had been good to film production: The government supported



12.60



12.61

12.60–12.61 Classic film as a reference point. In Godard’s *Vivre sa vie*, a clip from Dreyer’s *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (12.60) provokes Nana’s sympathy as she watches it (12.61). It also equates her with one of the great suffering heroines of silent cinema (see 4.46).



12.62 Borrowing from, and fighting, the New Wave. In spring 1995, a group of Danish directors founded a movement they called Dogme, to continue the impulse of the French New Wave. The group's manifesto laid down a series of rules, demanding that people shoot on location with a handheld camera and use no postproduction sound editing. One result was the second Dogme film, *The Idiots* (1998). It centered on a gang of young people who practice "spazzing"—going to public places and pretending to be physically or mentally handicapped, chiefly to test ordinary citizens' tolerance.



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We consider Godard's highly original use of stereoscopic technology in "Adieu au langage: 2 + 2 × 3D" and "Say hello to Goodbye to Language."

the industry through enforced quotas, banks had invested heavily, and there was a flourishing business of international coproductions. But in 1957, cinema attendance fell off drastically, chiefly because television became more widespread. By 1959, the industry was in a crisis. One solution was to encourage the independent financing of low-budget projects. New Wave directors shot films much more quickly and cheaply than did reigning directors. Moreover, the young directors helped one another out and reduced financial risk. By 1964, each New Wave director had his or her own production company, and the group had become absorbed into the film industry. By that time as well, the characteristic New Wave form and style had already become diffused and imitated (by, for instance, Tony Richardson in his 1963 English film *Tom Jones*). Most historians would argue that the movement, as a group initiative, had come to an end. Certainly, after 1968, the political upheavals in France drastically altered the personal relations among the directors.

New Wave figures remained powerful filmmakers for decades. Chabrol, Truffaut, and Rohmer became firmly entrenched in the French film industry, whereas Godard

set up a facility in Switzerland, and Rivette began to create narratives of staggering complexity and length (such as *Out One*, originally about 12 hours long). Their films, though seldom popular, continued to be supported by government subsidies, international agencies, and private financing. They had, in a sense, become the sort of Old Guard that they had rebelled against. Yet many continued to produce provocative and influential films. Godard was one of the first filmmakers to embrace video as a medium, and in 2010 he released an HD feature, *Film Socialisme*, that remains as defiantly nonconformist as all his work. The same rebellious attitude is evident in *Goodbye to Language* (2014), which experiments with 3D.

The New Wave not only created several original and valuable films but also demonstrated that a stodgy film industry could gain new energy from talented, aggressive young people inspired by the sheer love of cinema. It has become the prototype of the fully self-conscious movement—aware of its place in film history, able to work with low budgets, and shrewd in its realization that media culture is always looking for the next big thing. The Danish Dogme 95 group attacked the French New Wave (it "proved to be a ripple that washed ashore and turned to muck"), but they followed the earlier generation in demanding a break with conformity (12.62). And the New Wave was not mere bluff. Like the Neorealists they admired, these young filmmakers showed that making unusual creative decisions could reveal new possibilities in the art of cinema.

The New Hollywood and Independent Filmmaking, 1970s–1980s

Hollywood filmmakers sustained their tradition during the 1930s and 1940s by assimilating the technological demands of sound and color. In the 1950s and 1960s, they faced greater difficulties. There were new technologies, such as widescreen and stereophonic sound, to master, but the real problems lay elsewhere. By government decree, the vertically integrated studios had been broken up in the late 1940s. Distributors could no longer own theaters or demand that exhibitors take weak films. This breakup coincided with a sharp drop in attendance as Americans turned to television and other leisure activities. Filmmakers responded by targeting

certain market segments, like young people, and exploring previously forbidden content, like sex and drug use.

The Sound of Music (1965), *Dr. Zhivago* (1965), and a few other big films yielded huge profits, but these could not shore up the declining industry. Television networks, which had paid high prices to broadcast films after theatrical release, stopped bidding for pictures. American movie attendance flattened out at around 1 billion tickets per year. By 1969, Hollywood companies were losing over \$200 million annually.

Blockbusters and Indie Pictures

The industry was saved by what has been called the blockbuster mentality. Along with the predictable favorites, like Disney animation, the top-ranking films of the period included some surprises: *The Godfather* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *American Graffiti* (1973), *Jaws* (1975), *Star Wars* (1977), *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), and *Superman* (1978). Unlike most hits, these lacked established stars. They weren't based on Broadway musicals. They were in recognizable, even slightly down-market genres such as horror and science fiction, but they were enhanced by high production values and state-of-the-art special effects. Aimed at young audiences, they became "must-see" events, and many viewers returned again and again to their favorites. The 1970s blockbusters weren't usually designed to be colossal successes, but their box-office triumph convinced producers that a blockbuster could be engineered. In the process, Hollywood could be reinvented.

The studio-designed blockbusters came to be known as "tentpole" pictures because their profits sheltered other, smaller films. Studios spread their investment to star-driven romantic comedies, dramas, and adventure films. They continued to support, often by simply acquiring distribution rights, cheaper genre pictures likely to turn a profit. The studios also encouraged riskier fare that might win critical attention and awards. These might be prestige pictures like *Sleuth* (1972), or more controversial items like *Taxi Driver* (1976).

This division among blockbusters, program genre fare, Oscar bait, edgy experiments, and niche independents would roughly hold good from the 1970s through the 2010s. Tastes and trends would vary; *The Matrix* (1999) and *Men in Black 3* (2012) tell more complex stories than *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), but all show that science fiction, garlanded with top-flight special effects, was a steady source of blockbusters. Filmmakers might hop from one category to another. Spike Lee went from being a niche independent (*She's Gotta Have It*, 1986) to directing a prestige picture (*Malcolm X*, 1992), and then to more mainstream genre pictures (*Clockers*, 1995; *Inside Man*, 2006). Few would have predicted on the basis of *Mean Streets* (1973) and *Raging Bull* (1980) that Martin Scorsese would someday direct a children's 3D film budgeted at \$150 million (*Hugo*, 2011). Regardless of such mixing and matching, the strategy of designing projects at different budget levels and for different tastes sustained the Hollywood tradition in the modern era.

The Rise of the Movie Brats

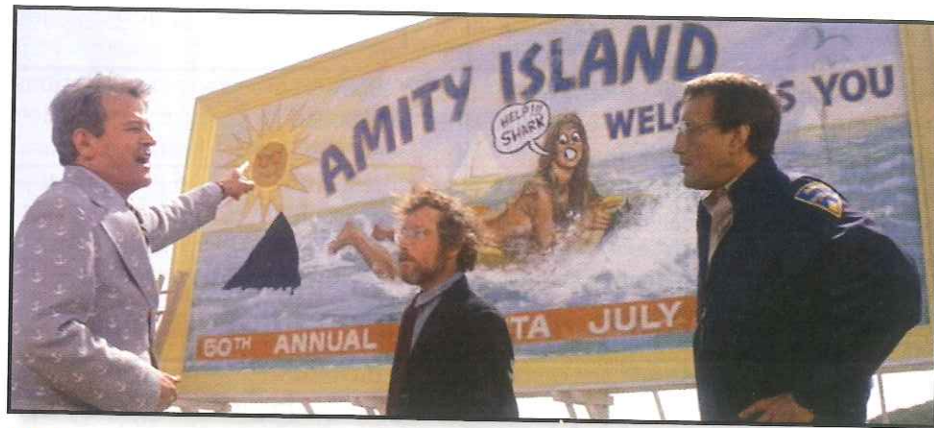
Nearly all the directors of Hollywood's golden age were dead or retired by 1975, so many major trends of that era sprang from young talent. A crucial feature set them apart from earlier American directors. Instead of coming up through the ranks of the studio system, most had gone to film schools. At New York University, the University of Southern California, and the University of California at Los Angeles, they had not only mastered the mechanics of production but also learned about film aesthetics and history. Like the French New Wave directors, the newcomers often had an encyclopedic knowledge of great movies and directors. As a result, they came to be known as the "movie brats." Whatever level of production they worked

"I love the idea of not being an independent filmmaker. I've liked working within the system. And I've admired a lot of the older directors who were sort of 'directors for hire.' Like Victor Fleming was in a contract all those years to Metro and Selznick and Mayer . . . he made *Captains Courageous*. And you know, his most famous films: *Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*."

—Steven Spielberg, producer/director

"To a whole generation, these [Hollywood classics] were more than just commodities. It was a part of who we are."

—Martin Scorsese, director



12.63 Staging for multiple points of interest. In *Jaws*, Steven Spielberg displayed a flair for depth staging that has been a hallmark of his work ever since.

in, they were quite aware of the traditions that they inherited, and they set out to both extend the traditions and try something new.

So, for instance, when Steven Spielberg and George Lucas revived the science fiction genre, they did so in full awareness of film history. With *Close Encounters* and *E. T.: The Extraterrestrial* (1982), Spielberg defied the tradition of predatory alien invaders by presenting his creatures as lovable. With *Star Wars* and its sequels, George Lucas consciously revived the disreputable “rocket opera” of Flash Gordon serials and Saturday-matinee kiddie shows. Collaborating on *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Spielberg and Lucas updated the B-movie serial, giving preposterous plots the dazzle of modern action choreography. Spielberg also tried his hand at Oscar bait, with *The Color Purple* (1985), *Schindler's List* (1993), and other prestige projects. His Amblin company produced lively genre pictures such as *Poltergeist* (1982) and *Gremlins* (1984).

For the studio-oriented movie brats, it wasn't all nostalgia. To turn B-movie material into blockbusters and A-pictures, they called on sophisticated technique. Lucas developed motion-control techniques for filming miniatures for *Star Wars*, and his firm Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) became the leader in new special-effects technology. From *Jaws* onward, Spielberg used deep-focus tactics reminiscent of *Citizen Kane* (5.48, **12.63**). Spielberg and Lucas also led the move toward digital sound and high-quality theater reproduction technology. They wanted the modern equivalent of the showmanship that had characterized such 1950s innovations as Cinerama and 3D.

Other filmmakers sought to revive the old Hollywood at a lower budget level. Brian De Palma's admiration for Hitchcock led him to a series of horror films (*Carrie*, 1976) and thrillers (*Obsession*, 1976). *Dressed to Kill* (1980) reworked *Psycho*, while *Body Double* (1984) did the same for *Rear Window*. Peter Bogdanovich's *What's Up, Doc?* (1972) was an updating of screwball comedy, with particular reference to Howard Hawks's *Bringing Up Baby*. John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) derived partly from Hawks's *Rio Bravo*; the editing is credited to “John T. Chance,” the character played by John Wayne in Hawks's Western.

Other Paths

For many critics, what made the 1970s an era of rejuvenation was the presence of *anti*-blockbusters, intimate dramas of ordinary people leading mundane lives. In *Five Easy Pieces* (1970), *The Last Picture Show* (1972), *The Last Detail* (1973), *Alice Doesn't Live Here Anymore* (1974), and other films, everyday

crises and psychological tensions came to the fore. They gave American cinema a dose of social realism that had been missing from both old Hollywood and the “New Hollywood” of Spielberg, Lucas, and other movie brats. Some of these films traced their impulse to the work of John Cassavetes, who presented immediate and visceral confrontations in *Faces* (1968), *Husbands* (1970), and *A Woman under the Influence* (1974).

These small-scale dramas, backed by studios or independent companies, showed that American cinema could adapt the slice-of-life approach to narrative construction seen in Italian Neorealism. But the rationale wasn't wholly formal. Part of these films' appeal came from a sexual frankness that was made possible by the establishing of the film ratings system in 1968. Curses and obscenities, nudity, adulterous affairs, and simulated sex came into the mainstream, and these were motivated as elements of a cinema that dared to shatter classic Hollywood conventions of romance.

Narrative experiments were even more marked in other films of the 1970s. Some directors dreamed of making complex art films in the European mold. The best-known effort is probably Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974), a mystery-story reworking of Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) that plays ambiguously between reality and hallucination (p. 301). Ventures into subjectivity, less clear-cut than the flashbacks and fantasies of the 1940s, were also seen in Robert Altman's *Images* (1972), Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz* (1979), and the opening of Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979; 12.36). Echoing the New Wave were films in which the directors' love of cinema emerged as self-conscious reminders that the audience was watching a film. Dennis Hopper's *The Last Movie* (1971) interrupted its flow with a title, “SCENE MISSING.” In Altman's *The Long Goodbye* (1973), Los Angeles detective Philip Marlowe seems aware that he's playing a hard-boiled detective but is not quite up to the part; the last shot shows him tap-dancing down a road to the tune of “Hooray for Hollywood.”

Altman gave currency to another storytelling strategy, one we might call the “network narrative.” “All-star” movies such as *Grand Hotel* (1932) had occasionally been made in the studio era, but *Nashville* (1975) and *A Wedding* (1978) took the principle of multiple protagonists and interwoven storylines to a new level. In these films, many characters converge in a single locale, such as a city or a social occasion, and then cross each others' paths, each one with individual concerns and no one emerging as a clear-cut hero or heroine. For Altman, the emphasis fell on chance encounters and incidents that might reveal character, rather than on a forward-moving, goal-driven plot.

Stylistically, the films in all these registers didn't challenge the core of the classic continuity system. Most filmmakers were content to employ it but inflect it in certain directions. It's in this period that we start to find that variant of the traditional 180° system we called intensified continuity in Chapter 6 (p. 246). Many filmmakers exploited the new resources of Dolby sound, which allowed for much greater dynamic range and permitted fine-grain detailing of the sound track. Altman pioneered a multiple-microphone recording technique that let him record, during a crowded scene, different conversations on different tracks and merge them into a dense mix that could stress or muffle certain lines.

The 1980s and After

With the colossal failure of *Heaven's Gate* (1980), studios lost faith in the auteur-driven blockbuster and turned control of such projects over to more tractable hands. More personal cinema survived, however, in the emerging realm of independent filmmaking. As usual, technology and money had a good deal to do with it.

During the 1980s, both cable television and home video, in the form of the videocassette tape, grew more popular. Small-budget filmmakers learned that they could finance a film by preselling the rights to video companies. In addition,



12.64

12.64–12.65 1980s independents. Wide-angle tracking shots follow crawling babies along the floor and under furniture in *Raising Arizona* (12.64) and Eva and Willie, the listless protagonists of *Stranger Than Paradise* (12.65): “These characters,” Jarmusch explains, “move through the world of the film in a kind of random, aimless way, like looking for the next card game or something.”



12.65

European television channels were eager for American films that were more affordable than Hollywood blockbusters. Films could find funding through the so-called mini-majors, firms that had access to private capital and had solid distribution prospects. For these and other reasons, the 1980s saw a wave of independently made films that achieved fairly wide distribution.

This was the period that launched novelist John Sayles on a directing career that led to his exploration of U.S. social and political history (*The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, 1980; *Matewan*, 1987). Joel and Ethan Coen established their comic-grotesque vision of America and its film genres with *Blood Simple* (1984) and *Raising Arizona* (1987; **12.64**). Susan Seidelman’s *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1985) featured popstar Madonna in a romantic comedy of mistaken identities. For many observers, this trend crystallized when Steven Soderbergh’s *sex, lies, and videotape* (1989) won the top prize at the Sundance Film Festival, already emerging as a showcase for off-Hollywood work. By the late 1980s there were 200–250 independent releases per year.

Several directors from independent film managed to shift into the mainstream, making medium-budget pictures with widely known stars. David Lynch moved from the midnight movie *Eraserhead* (1978) to the cult classic *Blue Velvet* (1986), and Canadian David Cronenberg, a specialist in low-budget horror films such as *Shivers* (1975), won wider recognition with *The Dead Zone* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986). Oliver Stone won Academy Awards for *Platoon* (1986), which propelled him into the bigger-budget realm. *She’s Gotta Have It* gave Spike Lee access to studio financing for *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and other films. Lee’s success paved the way for other African-American directors during the 1990s, a period that saw several minority and women directors starting careers in Hollywood or the independent realm.

Formally and stylistically, many 1980s films extended tendencies of the 1970s. David Lynch created disturbing, phantasmagoric narration in *Blue Velvet*. His exploration of subjectivity and primal, unconscious energies would become a hallmark of his career up through *Mulholland Dr.* (2001). *Stranger Than Paradise* presented a plot full of hesitations and down time, filmed in a rigorous fashion: one shot per scene, nearly always with the camera anchored to one spot (**12.65**). Jarmusch’s later *Mystery Train* (1989) experimented with multiple stories playing out simultaneously in different areas of Memphis, all linked by the moment of a gunshot.

Hollywood and Independents, To Be Continued

Much has happened since the 1980s, with studios sometimes courting independents and sometimes discouraging them, and animated features coming to play a bigger role at the box office. But many of the trends established in the 1970s persist. The major studios finance tentpole films, support star-driven comedies such as *The Heat* (2013), acquire genre projects as program filler, and occasionally turn a prestige picture such as *Lincoln* (2012) into a popular hit. Independent companies, or some “dependent” boutique branches of the studios, aim at ambitious genre pictures such as *Drive* (2011) and *Trance* (2013), along with Oscar bait. Other independent creators, such as Charlie Kaufman (*Synecdoche, New York*, 2008) and Miranda July (*You and Me and Everyone We Know*, 2005), survive on critics’ accolades and foreign distribution.

As usual, every opportunity demands decisions. James Cameron, with *Titanic* (1997) and *Avatar* (2009), personifies the director who sees his future bound up with blockbusters. The movie brats’ fondness for retooling genre pictures reappears in a younger generation’s *Cloverfield* (2008) and *Source Code* (2011). *Old Joy* (2006), *Rachel Getting Married* (2008), *Frozen River* (2008), *The Kids Are All Right* (2010), and many other films continue the 1970s impulse toward friends-and-family dramas with social implications (**12.66**). At the microbudget level is the trend called Mumblecore, low-tech exercises in psychological observation, with loose plotting and performances that give off an air of improvisation.

As in the CinemaScope era, well-established directors championed new technology for exhibition. Tim Burton’s *Batman Returns* (1992) became the first film mixed for Dolby Digital 5.1. Steven Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* marked the debut of DTS, which encoded audio information on compact discs synched with the projected images. By 2003, more than 65,000 screens across the globe had installed some type of digital sound. During the 2010s, director Peter Jackson’s *Hobbit* trilogy showcased High Frame Rate (HFR) projection and Dolby Atmos.

At all these levels of production, we continue to see the reworking of narrative strategies in mainstream romances, science fiction tales, and crime thrillers (p. 332). M. Night Shyamalan followed Hitchcock in turning narrative subterfuge into a personal signature with films like *The Sixth Sense* (1999). Christopher Nolan experimented with juggled chronology and embedded narratives in his lower budget *Memento* (2001) and *The Prestige* (2006). When he shifted to making blockbusters—for example, in *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014)—he continued to play with story time and probe alternate realities. The 1990s and 2000s also saw a burst of networked narratives such as *200 Cigarettes* (1999), *Thirteen Conversations about One Thing* (2001), and *Love Actually* (2003), with *Babel* (2006) taking the format to a global scale. Filmmakers continued to explore subjective storytelling as well. *Take Shelter* (2011) and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012; **12.67**) showed that ambiguous plunges into memories, dreams, and hallucinations still offered powerful resources to enterprising directors.

Yet the urge to experiment was curtailed by a shrinking market. With tentpoles claiming the bulk of ticket sales, most studios shut down their specialty divisions during the 2000s and 2010s. An independent film’s best chance for distribution was to be sold as “Oscar bait.” Ava DuVernay’s *Selma*, the biopic of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, had all the earmarks of a typical “Indiewood” project: a \$20 million budget, a cast lacking big stars, and a relatively unknown director. Hoping for awards that would enhance box-office sales, Paramount opted to release *Selma* under its flagship label rather than its specialty division, Paramount Vantage.

In a climate that discouraged innovation in theatrical releases, it’s not surprising that the 2000s saw network and cable television experimenting with narrative to a new extent. *The Wire*, *Six Feet Under*, *Damages*, *The Affair*, and other ambitious



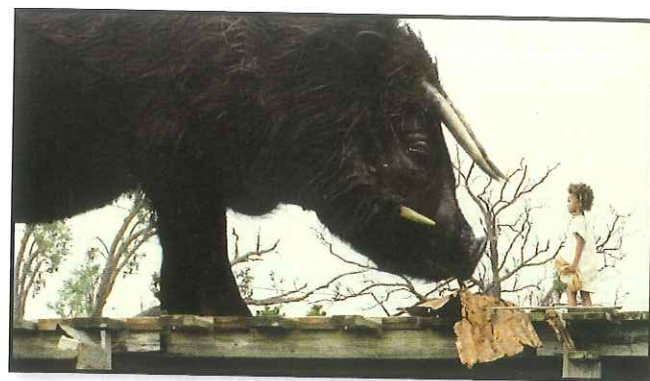
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Some independent filmmakers use sensationalism to call attention to their work. See “Visionary Outlaw Mavericks on the dark edge; or, Indie Guinol.”



12.66

12.66–12.67 Narrative explorations. The first shot of Ramin Bahrani's *Goodbye Solo* (2008) avoids traditional exposition and plunges us into a scene that is already at a turning point: Solo is laughing at what his grizzled passenger has just asked him to do (12.66). *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012) depicts southern bayou life with a mixture of social realism and mythological fantasy (12.67).



12.67



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The 50-year career of one director offers us a chance to survey changes in Hollywood and the independent scene in our entry, "Endurance: Survival lessons from Lumet."

series attracted admirers of independent cinema. Independent distributors began producing television shows, and directors often wound up working on high-profile cable series and streaming formats. Lena Dunham and Jill Soloway's modestly successful feature debuts gave them opportunities to create immensely popular television shows (*Girls*, *Transparent*). With most low-budget films finding their core audience watching at home on DVD and VOD, cable and Internet platforms ate away at the theatrical market. The changes generated more constraints, more opportunities, and more hard decisions for directors who wanted to tell stories outside the mainstream.

Hong Kong Cinema, 1980s–1990s

While independent directors were revamping American films in the 1980s, a young generation of directors in Hong Kong found footing in their industry and recast its traditional genres and creative methods. The result was a vigorous local tradition. Hong Kong's innovations in cinematic style and storytelling strongly influenced world filmmaking well into the 21st century.

A Local Tradition Goes Global

Although Hong Kong produced films in the silent era and during the 1930s, World War II halted production. When the industry revived in the 1950s, Shaw Brothers became the most powerful studio. Shaws owned theaters throughout East Asia and used Hong Kong as a production base for films in several languages, chiefly Mandarin Chinese. Shaws made films in many genres, but among its biggest successes were dynamic, gory swordfighting films (*wuxia pian*, or "tales of martial chivalry"). In the 1970s, another studio, Golden Harvest, triumphed with kung-fu films starring Bruce Lee. Although Lee completed only four martial-arts films before his death in 1973, he became the most famous Chinese actor of all time. Lee's graceful, almost feral presence brought Hong Kong cinema to worldwide attention and forever identified it with films of acrobatic and violent action.

Several major directors worked in this period. Most famous is King Hu, who started as a Shaws director. In films such as *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967) and *The Valiant Ones* (1975; 5.76), Hu reinvigorated the *wuxia pian* through graceful airborne swordplay and inventive cutting. Chang Cheh, another Shaws director, turned the swordplay film toward violent male melodrama (such as *The One-Armed Swordsman*, 1967) before specializing in flamboyant kung-fu films such as

Crippled Avengers (also called *Mortal Combat*, 1978). Neither King Hu nor Chang Cheh was a practitioner of martial arts, but Lau Kar-leung was a fight choreographer before becoming a full-fledged director. Lau created a string of inventive films (such as *36th Chamber of Shaolin*, 1978, and *The Eight-Diagram Pole Fighter*, 1983) that showcased a range of dazzling martial-arts techniques.

The New Generation: Two Schools

By the early 1980s, traditional kung-fu was fading in popularity, and Shaws turned from moviemaking to its lucrative television business. At the same time, a new generation of directors came forward. One group had little formal education but had grown up in the film industry, working as stuntmen and martial artists. Among those who became directors were choreographers Yuen Wo-ping and Yuen Kwei (*Yes, Madam!*, 1985). Sammo Hung choreographed, directed, and starred in many lively action films (such as *Eastern Condors*, 1987).

The most famous graduate of the studio system was Jackie Chan, who labored as a copy of Bruce Lee before finding his feet in comic kung-fu. With *Drunken Master* (1978, directed by Yuen Wo-ping), he became a star throughout Asia and gained the power to direct his own films. In the early 1980s, Chan and his colleagues realized that kung-fu could be incorporated into action movies in the Hollywood mold. Chan made the historical adventure *Project A* (1983, also starring Hung) and the contemporary cop drama *Police Story* (1985). These and others were huge hits across Asia, partly because of Chan's lovably goofy star persona and partly because of his resourceful and dangerous stunt scenes (6.49–6.51).

A second group of directors had more formal training, with many attending film schools in the United States or Britain. When Ann Hui, Allen Fong, and others returned to Hong Kong, they found work in television before moving on to feature filmmaking. For a time, they constituted a local art cinema, attracting attention at festivals with such films as Hui's *Boat People* (1982). But most of this group gravitated toward independent companies turning out comedies, dramas, and action films. Tsui Hark was the leader of this trend. As both director and producer, Tsui revived and reworked a range of genres: swordplay fantasy (*Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain*, 1979), romantic comedy (*Shanghai Blues*, 1984), historical adventure (*Peking Opera Blues*, 1986; 12.68), supernatural romance (*A Chinese Ghost Story*, 1987, directed by Ching Siu-tung), and classic kung-fu (*Once upon a Time in China*, 1990).

Seeing the success that urban crime films were enjoying, Tsui partnered with John Woo on *A Better Tomorrow* (1986), a remake of a 1960s movie (12.69). Woo was something of an in-between figure, having been a successful studio comedy director during the 1970s. With Tsui as producer, *A Better Tomorrow* became Woo's comeback effort, one of the most successful Hong Kong films of the 1980s and a star-making vehicle for the charismatic Chow Yun-fat. Tsui, Woo, and Chow teamed again for a sequel and for the film that made Woo famous in the West, *The Killer* (1989), a lush and baroque story of the unexpected alliance between a hitman and a detective (12.70).

Story and Style

Hong Kong cinema of the 1980s and early 1990s simmered with almost reckless energy. The rushed production schedules didn't allow much time to prepare scripts, so the plots, borrowing freely from Chinese legend and Hollywood genres, tended to be less tightly unified than those in U.S. films. They avoided tight linkage of cause and effect in favor of a more casual, episodic construction—not, as in Italian Neorealism, to suggest the randomness of everyday life but



12.68 Rhythmic staging. Abrupt movements into and out of the frame are characteristic of Hong Kong film style. In this shot from *Peking Opera Blues*, the sheriff and his captive rise into the foreground as the three heroines watch from the rear.



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Two major directors are analyzed in "Sometimes a jump cut," on King Hu's editing, and "Lion, dancing: Lau Kar-leung."



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We examine Hong Kong filmmaking style, and especially the work of Jackie Chan, in "Bond vs. Chan: Jackie shows how it's done."



12.69

12.69–12.70 John Woo, influential stylist. A striking long shot as a hero walks to meet his fate in *A Better Tomorrow* suggests Woo's debt to the Western (12.69). The urban crime thriller often parallels cop and crook—a convention that *The Killer* boldly fulfills in presenting detective and hitman as mirror images (12.70).



12.70

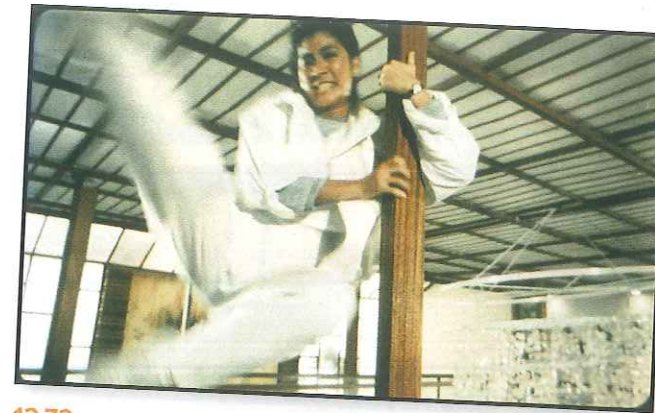
rather to permit chases and fights to be inserted easily. Whereas action sequences were meticulously choreographed, connecting scenes were often improvised and shot quickly. Similarly, the kung-fu films had often bounced between pathos and silly comedy, and this tendency to mix tones continued through the 1980s. Because of rushed shooting, the plots often end abruptly, with a big action set-piece but little in the nature of a mood-setting epilogue. One of Tsui's innovations was to provide more satisfying conclusions, as in the lilting railroad station finale of *Shanghai Blues*.

At the level of visual style, Hong Kong directors brought the action film to a new pitch of excitement. Gunmen (and gunwomen) leaped and fired in slow motion, hovering in midair like 1970s swordfighters and kung-fu warriors. Directors also developed florid color designs, with rich reds, blues, and yellows glowing out of smoky nightclubs or narrow alleyways. Well into the 2000s, unrealistically tinted mood lighting was a trademark of Hong Kong cinema (12.71). Above all, everything was sacrificed to constant motion; even in dialogue scenes, the camera and the characters seldom stood still.

Aiming to energize the viewer, the new action directors built on the innovations of King Hu and his contemporaries. They developed a staccato cutting technique based on the tempo of martial-arts routines and Peking Opera displays, alternating rapid movement with sudden pauses. If shot composition was kept simple, an action



12.71 Hong Kong stylization. Blocks of colored light enhance a gun battle in *The Longest Nite* (1998).



12.72



12.73



12.74

12.72–12.74 Rhythmic editing and movement. During a fight scene in *Yes, Madam!* Michele Yeoh swings swiftly around, in a shot only 7 frames long (12.72). In two more shots, 12.73 and 12.74, she knocks the villain spinning (15 frames), and drops smoothly into a relaxed posture on the rail (17 frames). Her stillness at the end of the shot provides a pause before she launches another assault.

could be cut to flow across shots very rapidly, while one shot could accentuate a moment of stillness (12.72–12.74). Most Hong Kong directors were unaware of the Soviet Montage movement, but in their efforts to arouse viewers through expressive movement and editing, they were reviving ideas of concern to those 1920s filmmakers.

Legacy Overseas

The 1990s brought the golden age of Hong Kong action cinema to a close. Jackie Chan, John Woo, Chow Yun-fat, Sammo Hung, and action star Jet Li began working in Hollywood, with Yuen Wo-ping designing the action choreography for *The Matrix* (1999) and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). A recession after Hong Kong's 1997 handover to China depressed the local film industry. As Hollywood began imitating Hong Kong movies, local audiences developed a taste for U.S. films. At the same time, the art-cinema wing became more ambitious, and festivals rewarded the offbeat works of Wong Kar-wai (see the analysis of *Chungking Express*, pp. 428–432). The action tradition was maintained by only a few directors such as Johnnie To, whose laconic film noir *The Mission* (1999) brought a leanness and pictorial abstraction to the gangster genre.

The legions of American fans of Hong Kong films included Quentin Tarantino, who paid homage to the Asian action cinema in *Kill Bill, Volumes 1 and 2* (2003–2004). He mixed together elements of Japanese swordplay, anime, and low-budget European thrillers, but his allegiance to Hong Kong's tradition shone through (12.75). Just as other countries' cinemas borrow from Hollywood, Hollywood selectively absorbed Hong Kong's innovations in staging and cutting action.

Tarantino was a film fan from childhood. He watched old movies on TV, recent releases in theaters, and anything that caught his fancy on VHS. Like every

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A week-long series of blog entries devoted to Hong Kong film starts with "PLANET HONG KONG now in cyberspace." "PLANET HONG KONG: The dragon dances" is devoted to analyzing Hong Kong action scenes. "The Grandmaster: Moving forward, turning back" discusses a major film Wong Kar-wai made after *Chungking Express*, and "Mixing business with pleasure: Johnnie To's *Drug War*" examines a crime thriller set in mainland China.



12.75 *Kill Bill* and Hong Kong cinema. Although the weaponry in this fight consists mostly of samurai swords, director Tarantino pays tribute to the Hong Kong tradition: Yuen Woo-ping serves as martial-arts choreographer and the heroine wears Bruce Lee's signature yellow track suit.

filmmaker, he started as a film viewer; like many filmmakers, he was keen to explore the entire range of film history. Asked what he does in his spare time, he replied, "What you'd expect—read, listen to music, hang out with friends, watch my video and DVD collection. Get obsessions about this or that. I'm a film historian so I'm always trying to feed my brain."

Just as anyone who thinks, talks, and writes analytically about movies is doing film criticism, Tarantino is right to suggest that seeking out older films and letting them feed your brain is a step toward doing film history. The films he sees nourish his passion to create films himself. Even if you don't follow that career path, thinking like a filmmaker includes opening yourself up to the vast variety of films made in different times and places. By considering what artistic choices were available, by recognizing the creative decisions made by filmmakers who have come before us, we become more sensitive to every movie we see. To fully appreciate the films we watch now, we need to be aware that their makers are struggling with the same problems and decisions that appear at every moment of film history. Technology, tastes, and received traditions offer both opportunities and constraints—sometimes opportunities *within* constraints.

By looking at films from a historical angle, we realize that filmmakers have always been as fascinated by the power of movies as we are today. As Wölfflin says, not everything may be possible at all times. Still, some filmmakers always try to push the boundaries of what *is* possible, and others show us new possibilities in what seems familiar. Their hard work and imaginative energies have given us richer experiences of the art of cinema.

GLOSSARY

abstract form A type of filmic organization in which the parts relate to one another through repetition and variation of such visual qualities as shape, color, rhythm, and direction of movement.

Academy ratio The standardized shape of the film frame established by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. In the original ratio, the frame was $1\frac{1}{3}$ times as wide as it was high (1.33:1); later the width was normalized at 1.85 times the height (1.85:1).

aerial perspective A cue for suggesting depth in the image by presenting objects in the distance less distinctly than those in the foreground.

anamorphic lens A lens for making widescreen films using regular *Academy ratio* frame size. The camera lens takes in a wide field of view and squeezes it onto the frame, and a similar projector lens unsqueezes the image onto a wide theater screen.

angle of framing The position of the frame in relation to the subject it shows: above it, looking down (a high angle); horizontal, on the same level (a straight-on angle); below it, looking up (a low angle). Also called *camera angle*.

animation Any process whereby artificial movement is created by photographing a series of drawings (see also *cel animation*), objects, or computer images one by one. Small changes in position, recorded frame by frame, create the illusion of movement.

aspect ratio The relationship of the frame's width to its height. The standard *Academy ratio* is currently 1.85:1.

associational form A type of organization in which the film's parts are juxtaposed to suggest similarities, contrasts, concepts, emotions, and expressive qualities.

asynchronous sound Sound that is not matched temporally with the movements occurring in the image, as when dialogue is out of synchronization with lip movements.

auteur The presumed or actual author of a film, usually identified as the director; also sometimes used in an evaluative sense to distinguish good filmmakers (*auteurs*) from bad ones.

axis of action In the *continuity editing* system, the imaginary line that passes through the main actors or the principal movement. The axis of action defines the spatial relations of all the elements of the scene as being to the right or left. The camera is not supposed to cross the axis at a cut and thus reverse those spatial relations. The axis of action is also called the 180° line. See also *180° system*, *screen direction*.

backlighting Illumination cast onto the figures in the scene from the side opposite the camera, usually creating a thin outline of highlighting on those figures.

Blu-ray disc (or BD) A high-definition digital medium for home video, similar to a DVD but having a higher storage capacity and producing a higher-resolution image.

boom A pole on which a microphone can be suspended above the scene being filmed and that is used to change the microphone's position as the action shifts.

camera angle See *angle of framing*.

canted framing A view in which the frame is not level; either the right or the left side is lower than the other, causing objects in the scene to appear slanted out of an upright position.

categorical form A type of filmic organization in which the parts treat distinct subsets of a topic. For example, a film about the United States might be organized into 50 parts, each devoted to a state.

cel animation Animation that uses a series of drawings on pieces of celluloid, called *cels* for short. Slight changes between the drawings combine to create an illusion of movement.

CGI Computer-generated imagery: using digital software systems to create figures, settings, or other material in the frame.

cheat cut In the *continuity editing* system, a cut that presents continuous time from shot to shot but that mismatches the positions of figures or objects.

cinematography A general term for all the manipulations of the film strip by the camera in the shooting phase and by the laboratory in the developing phase.

close-up A framing in which the scale of the object shown is relatively large; most commonly, a person's head seen from the neck up, or an object of a comparable size that fills most of the screen.

closure The degree to which the ending of a narrative film reveals the effects of all the causal events and resolves (or "closes off") all lines of action.

constructive editing Editing that suggests a scene's space by providing only portions of it, without an establishing shot.

continuity editing A system of cutting to maintain continuous and clear narrative action. Continuity editing relies on matching screen direction, position, and temporal relations from shot to shot. For specific techniques of continuity editing, see *axis of action*, *crosscutting*, *cut-in*, *establishing shot*, *eyeline match*, *match on action*, *reestablishing shot*, *screen direction*, *shot/reverse shot*.

contrast In cinematography, the difference between the brightest and the darkest areas within the frame.

crane shot A shot with a change in framing accomplished by placing the camera above the subject and moving through the air in any direction.

crosscutting Editing that alternates shots of two or more lines of action occurring in different places, usually simultaneously.

cut (1) In filmmaking, the joining of two strips of film together with a splice. (2) In the finished film, an instantaneous change from one framing to another. See also *jump cut*.